

ARE OUR GOALS REALLY WHAT WE'RE AFTER?

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of  
The University of Utah  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Philosophy

The University of Utah

December 2012

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# **The University of Utah Graduate School**

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## ABSTRACT

Long-term goals typically represent our deepest concerns and interests: they are our current life-size ambitions. Whereas instrumentalist theories of deliberation claim that the point of having them is achieving them, I argue that deliberation toward final ends operates primarily in the service of decision-making for present action. We use them to generate priorities in the here and now. Functioning in this capacity, having long-term goals is valuable *regardless* of whether we achieve or abandon them later. That's a good thing, because while it is rarely acknowledged in philosophical work, we typically abandon the large majority of long-term goals that we pursue at different periods of life. Embracing the idea that abandoning goals is not a practical failure, my proposal calls for a reassessment of practical commitment. It makes sense to give ourselves some slack between what practical rationality demands of us now and what happens later. I conclude that a proper account of practical rationality will require coming to terms with a more present-oriented picture of deliberation and agency.

A mis padres, que nos vemos en el cielo.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
Chapters	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II THE PRIORITIZATION PROBLEM.....	14
The Problems with Ranking Preferences.....	16
The Difficulties with Desires.....	18
Making Progress with Prioritization.....	26
Letting Go of Long-term goals.....	34
Defending Prioritization Against Instrumentalist Dogma.....	37
Conclusion.....	44
III CAN THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE TEST FINAL ENDS?.....	46
Characterizing the CI-Procedure.....	48
Critiquing the Contradiction in Conception Test.....	59
Hedging Bets and the Hypothetical Imperative.....	62
Critiquing the Contradiction in the Will Test.....	64
Distinguishing Prioritization and Practical Identities.....	69
Conclusion.....	73
IV LIFE IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU ARE MAKING OTHER PLANS...75	
Arguing for the Primacy of Action-theoretic Explanation.....	79
Destabilizing Action-theoretic Explanation.....	85
Prioritizing in an Action-theoretic Context.....	92
Conclusion.....	97
V CONCLUSION.....	99
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	104

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Elijah Millgram for his encouragement, generosity, and patience. He has been a great teacher, and I have been lucky to be his student. I am also indebted to my committee members, Mariam Thalos, Chrisoula Andreou, Ron Mallon, and Yonatan Shemmer. Their insight and support over many years have been invaluable. I am grateful to the many graduate students that attended Kaffeeklatsch over the years. Our discussions helped me to develop and write this dissertation. In particular, Matt Mosdell has been a great sparring partner. His trenchant criticism has always been valuable. I would also like to thank my good friends and colleagues, Monika Piotrowska and Jenn Warriner. Their support kept me going in difficult moments, as both of them know well. Finally, I would like to thank Kyson Jacobson, Anna Young, and Fletcher Kohlhausen for their friendship. It's meant more to me than you can know.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
But do not hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you are old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.  
Without her you would not have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
You will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.<sup>1</sup>

Consider a child declaring that he is going to be a fireman when he grows up. On the received view of practical rationality, that is, the instrumental account of practical reasoning, the situation is one in which the child embraces the pursuit of that goal, and his work will be complete upon becoming a fireman. Practically, rational individuals take the means to their ends. That description, however, does not quite fit with the facts. We expect the boy to use his goal in figuring out what to do now, but it would be quite

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<sup>1</sup> C.P. Cavafy, "Ithaka," in *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*, ed. George Savidis, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 36-7.



surprising if he actually became a fireman in the long run. That's because we expect his final ends to change. At the same time, we don't tend to think it is a mistake or a waste for the boy to pursue the goal for a time. So in this case of pursuing a goal, we don't expect the goal to be achieved, *and* we don't think pursuing it is a waste.

The scenario is not an anomaly. Children go through cycles like this all the time, and when we, as adults, look to what they're doing, we see it as a good strategy; we think they are getting something right about deliberation and decision. The goal of becoming a fireman helps the boy decide what to do in the present, where that involves commitment and self-understanding. Using long-term goals for deciding what to do in the present is a way of asserting deliberative control over the direction our lives will take. In addition, the experiences themselves are valuable. Learning about becoming a fireman serves as a source of information about the world *and* as input to future deliberation about future goals and actions. Such considerations apply to adult decision-making as well. Adults also act in the service of long-term goals, we gain something from those experiences, and that brings about changes in what we care about going forward. Those changes include abandoning our goals for the sake of something new.

The point to notice is that all of these considerations remain true about what the boy is doing *regardless* of whether he actually becomes a fireman when he grows up. Theorists tell us that we pursue goals for the sake of achieving them, but it's clear that there are other benefits to organizing our action this way. What the example shows is that we need to acknowledge that the *local* value of a long-term goal is distinct from the *distant* value inherent in achieving it.

Although these claims are compatible with taking instrumental reasoning to be the

foundation of practical reason, they work against the assumption that having and pursuing long-term goals is strictly in order to achieve them. We certainly do organize our lives around our deepest commitments and self-conception, but what those things are change over time: long-term, final ends are quite vulnerable to revision. Living a human life, or even pursuing a particular long-term goal, just isn't like running one's way through a previously determined race course. Desires and attitudes are capricious; they get in the way of treating plans like a predetermined path. We change our minds about what we want and which desires to satisfy *all the time*. We have to compromise and make sacrifices in the face of unpredictable circumstances. And it's all perfectly natural because the stages of a human life themselves bring about very real changes in what matters to us.

These observations suggest that we shouldn't take means-end reasoning at face value. It isn't any sort of "necessary truth" that the only reason to figure out how to attain our ends is in order to achieve them, even if the thought is initially persuasive. Thus, my project is to investigate what reasons there might be for planning and pursuing long-term goals even if we *don't* achieve them later on. I want to consider what—if any—practical advantage we stand to gain from calculating the means to an end independently of whether we ultimately achieve the goal. If, as I suspect, there are such reasons for planning and pursuing goals, we will have an explanation for what is otherwise an unattractive philosophical consequence of the natural fact that what we care about changes as our lives proceed. We will have done so by illustrating how abandoning a long-term goal is an acceptable outcome of perfectly rational deliberation and decision. And instead of concluding that practical rationality demands something that agents like

us just cannot do, I'll offer an account of practical rationality that accommodates what makes sense for us.

The place to begin my discussion is with instrumentalist accounts of practical reasoning. Instrumentalism is the view that practical reasoning consists of means-end reasoning exclusively. Although philosophers have argued about the exclusivity clause, they have accepted the centrality of means-end reasoning with very little critical uptake. Having done so, we tend to operate on the assumption that achieving the goal is all that matters. This assumption explains why instrumental reasoning has always been so central in theories of practical rationality.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, there has been very little in the way of opposition. I suspect that, at least with respect to recent philosophical history, this is a consequence of how debate about practical rationality has evolved over the latter half of the twentieth century. Theorists typically came to the issues of practical rationality in the light of their significance for ethics. One's account of decision had to accommodate one's views in ethics, as well as providing philosophical support for them. Since nobody thought immorality was a function of means-end reasoning, debate focused on the deliberation of ends. So the frame of the debate portrayed means-end reasoning as unproblematic, both in terms of its inferential structure and its function in deliberation: instrumental reasoning is a stepwise calculation from a given end to the means for achieving it. We do it in order to achieve the goal.

This preliminary analysis set the terms in the field of practical rationality even as

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<sup>2</sup> Producing new species of "instrumentalism" is a philosophical cottage industry in recent years, and so there is much debate about what the core commitments of the view actually are. I use the term to pick out the family of views in accordance with the spirit of the claim above, even if they do not fully embrace the exclusionary stance of the view. For an illuminating discussion of the varieties of instrumentalism, see Candace Vogler, *Reasonably Vicious* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 10-22.

debate began to move toward distinguishing it from moral philosophy proper. Thus, in an early and influential article, Bernard Williams presented a model of practical psychology that embraced presuppositions about the role of instrumental reasoning. He held that, after picking which desires to satisfy, the objects of those desires become goals, and theoretical reasoning determines the means to achieving them. Turning to the deliberation of ends, Williams' paper helped to separate the question of whether there are rational constraints on final ends from the ethical evaluation of ends. But his practical psychology presupposes that there is nothing to worry about when it comes to means-end reasoning, for it is an underlying commitment to the stepwise calculative structure as well as the point of using it that grounds the account.<sup>3</sup> The assumption that means-end reasoning is the core of practical deliberation *because* achieving goals is our primary concern is not given a substantive defense.

Seeing practical psychology in terms of this instrumental structure gives rise to a side debate about how we choose which desires to satisfy. We need a way of picking out which goals to pursue. The catch-all word for solutions to it is *identification*. The idea is that who you are—where that understanding has temporal structure, and so also a narrative structure—is the source for resolving the matter of what to pursue. We want the solution to be one that connects an individual's goals to her understanding of who she is as a person. Identification, then, is the process by which an individual determines her goals and thereby takes responsibility for them. In this way, debate about identification linked practical rationality to concerns about freedom of the will, and it altered the philosophical ties between moral and practical philosophy. Since moral criticism of an

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<sup>3</sup> "Internal and External Reasons," in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, ed. Elijah Millgram (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 78-97.

individual for either her ends or her actions is appropriate only to the extent that she possess them, one's account of identification becomes the bridge between rational and moral evaluation.

Nobody seems to have questioned the idea that identification begins with a thorough-going commitment to achieving one's end. Theorists have simply assumed the commitment is there, and that it just is full-blooded. Debate has been about what, if anything, is required above and beyond that commitment.<sup>4</sup> But if I'm right, that's not the proper way to think about practical commitment. Commitment is *transient*, and that means something has gone wrong in our attempts to provide an account of identification.

Remember that the problem with taking instrumental structure as fundamental is that we are left to figure out what to pursue now. Theorists assumed that this is a problem precisely and only because the point of performing an action is getting the goal. From that perspective, asking the question of what to do now looks to be the same as asking what goal you want to get most. But if merely having long-term goals doesn't require a full blooded commitment to achieving them later on, then figuring out what to do now

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<sup>4</sup> There is a large amount of literature on this topic. See Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," 80; Harry Frankfurt, "Identification and Wholeheartedness," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 167-172; Michael Bratman, "Identification, Decision, and Treating as a Reason," in *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 185-206; Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25; Martha Nussbaum, "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 294-5; Charles Taylor, "Leading a Life," in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 179-80; David Velleman, "The Story of Rational Action," in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 158-68; Elijah Millgram, *Practical Induction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 50-56. While each of these philosophers see identification as a basic consideration in an account of deliberation, their substantive accounts diverge significantly.

isn't the same thing as figuring out what you want most. These questions come apart, and so we shouldn't assume that answering one amounts to answering the other. Moreover, we should provide an account of deliberation that doesn't depend on a commitment that isn't there.

Because theorists operated on the assumption that instrumental structure is unproblematically fundamental, they conceived of identification as secondary to figuring out what you want and how to get it. But that isn't the correct way to think about it. Being able to figure out what to do is of primary importance because it is a necessary condition for achieving any goals at all. What's more, agents with a multitude of long-term goals must have *stable* priorities in order to achieve their ends. If we couldn't resolve these issues, planning would be *pointless*. If we can't follow through on our plans, instrumental reasoning about the future doesn't get off the ground as a form of practical reasoning at all. So it's misguided to conceive of ourselves as agents who reason instrumentally about the future, and only after that's done encounter the problem of picking out what to pursue now. Insofar as we are instrumentally reasoning agents, having a strategy for figuring out what to do *must* be a part of the deliberative package. Rather than thinking about it in terms of identification, I prefer to construe the strategy as one of setting priorities.

I'll offer an alternative solution to this problem that doesn't hang on these presuppositions about instrumental reasoning. My claim is that we can use long-term plans and goals for figuring out what to do. So I'll be arguing that long-term goals serve a function in deliberation above and beyond that posited by instrumentalism. The proposal is constructed around the need to manage the problem with limited resources and time.

Thus, we exploit the calculative structure in the plans and goals we already have in view. To see how it works, we must differentiate instrumental reasoning, i.e., adopting intentions to perform the means to an end, from the calculative structure of a plan, i.e., the agent's representational outcome of deliberation. We use these long-term calculative structures as criteria for excluding present options. Simply having long-term plans and goals are tools for resolving the question of what to do. This creates a reason to have long-term goals in spite of how often we abandon them; for while particular goals will come and go, we are authentically invested in our present goals. Thus, it makes sense to decide in accordance with those goals. And as I pointed out earlier, there are benefits available to us for doing so.

Let's look at an example. Many couples who decide in favor of having children try to plan for it, figuring out when the time is right. Instrumentalists have it that means-end deliberation will yield a concrete result, and perhaps it would, eventually. If that's the strategy for making the decision, however, it might take a while to determine what it's going to be. Life partners have many shared *and* individual goals. Ranking all of them together is itself something of a negotiation. Integrating the plans associated with each of the goals included in the set is a massive calculative task, especially given the fact that extended plans are generally not completely filled out, and they must be flexible. It's certainly possible that the process will produce a single instrumentally-endorsed recommendation. It's also possible that it won't. It's likely that trying to make a good decision in the face of this immensely complicated deliberative process leads to exasperation rather than a confident decision.

The alternative I recommend exploits long-term goals and plans, but it abandons

the stepwise procedure of instrumental reasoning and plan integration. Long-term financial goals and plans are clearly relevant to decisions about having children, and couples can usually agree on a certain level of financial security as a subgoal. That subgoal can work to exclude options about when to have a child. Making a prediction about when they expect to achieve that security, they can simply remove any point in time prior to that from the set of options. Another major concern about becoming a parent is the potential for conflict with professional goals. People usually want to achieve a certain amount of professional advancement before trying to balance a career and parenthood. There are typically stages to developing a career, and these function as subgoals. Deciding not to have a baby until having reached one of those stages can also remove options from consideration. And so the procedure goes forward until the decision gets made.

Instead of ranking final ends and integrating one's life plans, deliberation appeals to a goal that is clearly relevant and important enough to use in reducing the set of options under consideration. We don't need or want to integrate all of our life plans at once. We coordinate plans when we can see that our proposed courses of action are going to converge. That's a matter of what the plan is for, and the particular details of timing and circumstance. But it's a waste of resources to coordinate plans too far in advance since we can't rely on assumptions about what the situation will be. The couple's long-term goals are there to provide constraints for a choice they are about to make, and it doesn't matter whether they achieve them later. "Goals" such as these—I'm going to call them aspirations—are there to guide. When the couple drops them, they are not giving up or failing: the aspirations served their purpose in leading to a decision. Deliberation isn't



a matter of integrating financial, professional, and family goals from the distant future all the way down to the present; the couple isn't integrating their goals at all. It doesn't matter how they relate to one another.

This strategy is not means-end reasoning, but it is a kind of practical calculation. Instead of moving stepwise from end to means all the way down, it allows one to traverse the structure with a view to setting priorities, which is distinct from simply determining what course of action will lead to the end. The motivational backing for decision is the same as it is for pure instrumental reasoning: the background desire to pursue an end, or set of ends.

The strategy has noticeable payoffs. Operating within the calculative structure laid out by available goals and plans, the decision removes difficult questions about value, and we evade the problem of ruminating about what we "really" want. Moreover, using preestablished goals and plans as deliberative constraints guarantees broad means-end coherence, since the choice fits within one's broader life plans. The strategy also loads motivation associated with discrete long-term goals onto the selection made because it aligns local actions with one's long-term goals.

Whereas instrumentalism construes goals as the inert stopping point for deliberation, my proposal ascribes an active deliberative role to them, namely, solving the primary problem for instrumentally reasoning agents: figuring out what to do now. The account, therefore, turns the instrumentalist assumptions I have been discussing on their heads. Instrumentalism takes thought about the present as doing work in the service of the future, but on my account we have to acknowledge that the converse is also true: thought about the future works in the service of present decision, and it is matters of this

kind that must be our deliberative priority. These claims stand in opposition to a great deal of philosophical dogma regarding practical rationality, so the next chapter is devoted to clearing the ground needed so as to find a place for the account.

I have been trying to signal that underlying investigation of the instrumental assumptions about achieving our goals is an inquiry about the nature of practical commitment. I have been arguing that it makes sense to use long-term goals for deliberation in the present *because* of our present commitment to them, while at the same time, abandoning them is an acceptable consequence of a rational deliberative strategy. The issue with which we must come to terms is the *transience* of our commitments. An account of practical commitment must have something to say about how we negotiate these changes, rather than sweeping them under the rug. After presenting the arguments for my position in the next chapter, later chapters will look at two prominent accounts of practical rationality to see how instrumental presumptions about goals and practical commitments ultimately undermine the views.

The first type of position I will examine is that of the New Kantians.<sup>5</sup> The primary innovation of this group in moral philosophy is the appeal to practical rather than theoretical rationality in understanding and applying the Kantian Categorical Imperative. As individual theorists, they present diverse views, but with respect to interpreting the Hypothetical Imperative—and so with respect to the heart of practical reasoning—they embrace the standard view. So they are an example of noninstrumentalist theorists who

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<sup>5</sup> See Onora O’Neil, *Acting on Principle* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1975 (published under the name Onora Nell)); Christine Korsgaard, *The Standpoint of Practical Reason* (New York, NY: Garland Press, 1990), and *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009); Barbara Herman, “Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties,” in *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 132-158.

make the assumption that I'm contesting about the function of instrumental rationality. Since I'm arguing that the assumption is false, the New Kantian position is as well. My purpose is twofold: I want to illustrate that the point I am making has consequences for straight moral theory, and it's also a preparation for rethinking the varieties of practical commitment at work in our lives.

Finally, I will address the work of Michael Thompson, a representative of the Anscombian approach to practical reasoning.<sup>6</sup> Here again, uncovering false assumptions about instrumental rationality works to refute his view. This will show that even the recent turn to action theory is vulnerable to the claims that I'm making. So concerns about the transience of practical commitment have significant consequences for broader debate in practical rationality.

Taken as two extremes, my discussion of these views should be understood as an appeal to search for a middle path. Practical commitment is neither wholly attitudinal nor entirely intellectual. In the next chapter, I'll suggest that we can make progress on the issues surrounding commitment by thinking about a certain kind of practical self-conception; for we can make a deep commitment to a conception of ourselves as agents in the business of advancing our interests, while at the same time acknowledging and managing the fact that those interests will change. Long-term goals give shape to the conception, thereby affording a broad temporal reach. The plans we have in view provide the structure. It is our commitment to the significance of this kind of conception that grounds our pursuits, and it is the internal calculative structure of the concept that we exploit in figuring out what to do now.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

Before starting in on the arguments, there are a couple of general comments I want to make. First, there is a body of literature that I will not be addressing, namely, that which falls under the rubric of decision theory. The reason is that mainstream economists treat choice as “a behavioral pattern... influenced, through any kind of channel, by incentives.”<sup>7</sup> That represents a significant difference between economic and philosophical accounts of decision. Providing an analysis and finding common ground is just too large a task to take up in this context. Secondly, I hope to avoid any and all issues concerning the nature of value. The position I am putting forward does not require taking a stand on these matters, and I suspect that doing so would only muddy the waters. One’s conception of value tends to be closely linked to one’s conception of practical rationality, and so if my arguments succeed, my results will contribute to that debate.

While the instrumentalist account of practical rationality is a target for me, I want to hold onto the idea that the calculative structure of our practical thinking is profoundly important. My aim is to dislodge some of the preconceptions about *why* it’s so significant, thereby updating and increasing our understanding of it. By no longer taking the function of long-term goals or means-end reasoning for granted, my conclusions serve to distance us from the previous generation’s debate about instrumentalism and liberate us from the problem of preference ranking. My view of practical reasoning embraces—rather than avoids—the empirical facts about abandoning goals, and in so doing, presents an opportunity to locate the focus of our deliberation, agency, and action in the present rather than the future.

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<sup>7</sup> Don Ross, “The Economic Agent: Not human, but important,” in *Handbook of the Philosophy of Science*, v. 13: *Economics*, ed. U. Mäki (London: Elsevier Press), 632.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PRIORITIZATION PROBLEM

A story: Jeremy settles down at his desk one evening to study for an examination. Finding himself a little too restless to concentrate, he decides to take a walk in the fresh air. His walk takes him past a nearby bookstore, where the sight of an enticing title draws him in to look at a book. Before he finds it, however, he meets his friend Neil, who invites him to join some of the other kids at the bar next door for a beer. Jeremy decides he can afford to have just one, and goes with Neil to the bar. When he arrives there, however, he finds that the noise gives him a headache, and he decides to return home without having a beer. He is now, however, in too much pain to study. So Jeremy doesn't study for his examination, hardly gets a walk, doesn't buy a book, and doesn't drink a beer.<sup>8</sup>

Prioritization is the essential skill you need to make the very best use of your own efforts and those of your team. It's also a skill that you need to create calmness and space in your life so that you can focus your energy and attention on the things that really matter.<sup>9</sup>

The guiding concern in developing the argument in this chapter is that there is a deep tension between the thought that practical reasoning is—first and foremost—a tool for achieving our goals and the observation that we abandon long-term goals frequently. The question to answer is why we have long-term goals, pursue them, and then abandon them. I've provided a preview of my answer to that question in the Introduction: we have

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<sup>8</sup> Korsgaard, "Normativity of Instrumental Reason," 247 (footnote).

<sup>9</sup> Mindtools.com, "Prioritization: Making Best Use of Your Time and Resources," accessed May 21, 2012, [http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE\\_92.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_92.htm).

long-term goals for the sake of figuring out what to do now. Long-term goals help us to set priorities. If that explanation is going to stand, however, I need to show that the other deliberative devices available to us cannot do the job. Making the case for this last claim is the work of this chapter. With those arguments in place, there will be grounds for considering my alternative.

We need to provide an account of identification, that is, an explanation for how agents pick out which goal to pursue or which available course of action to carry out in the present. I have suggested that, under the influence of instrumental assumptions, philosophers of practical rationality have a misguided approach to the problem, so I'll start with a critique of the standard approaches, focusing on those that hew closely to traditional instrumentalism. I will then present my account of how we make choices about what to do in the present, that is, how we prioritize, arguing that, contrary to the received view, much of the deliberation associated with final ends serves us primarily in setting priorities. This is a surprising thesis, so I'll conclude with an additional argument to illustrate how, when you look closely, purported instrumentalist solutions end up presupposing that the problem has been solved already.

Dyed-in-the-wool instrumentalists may not be convinced, but I hope my arguments will persuade them that, even if an instrumentalist strategy for setting priorities can work, it's not always the most effective or efficient way to do it. That's reason enough for giving my alternative a fair hearing. Taking the framework of bounded rationality as a starting point, we should expect boundedly rational agents to develop a variety of strategies for setting priorities. The position I'll be defending suggests that our thought about the future is a tool for being successful now, and so my proposal is an

attempt to think about how goals might do more for us than function as the endpoint of deliberation merely. If abandoning goals is an acceptable consequence of reasonable deliberative practices, my proposal is a more realistic model of our deliberative practices, and it contributes to debate over identification as well.

### The Problems with Ranking Preferences

I will begin by assuming, throughout most of this chapter, that practical rationality consists in means-end reasoning, and *nothing further*. This conception encompasses the ability to plan, restricting the notion of planning to constructing extended courses of action in the pursuit of less immediate goals. That is to say, planning does not have any built-in deliberative strategy for managing the problem of prioritization.<sup>10</sup> This starting point provides a clear and concise view of practical deliberation: there is one deliberative strategy and a determinate set of inputs upon which it works. The strategy is means-end reasoning, and the inputs on which it operates are one's goals and the associated beliefs about how to go about achieving those goals.

As has long been acknowledged, prioritization requires some further skill above

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<sup>10</sup> I am using the notion of planning to refer to sophisticated instrumental deliberation merely. This is distinct from Michael Bratman's more elaborate treatment of plans and planning. Bratman uses our capacity to plan in illuminating the question of what it is for us to have an intention, and he characterizes our agency as planning agency. In arguing for these claims, having a plan commits an agent to more than having a complicated means-end strategy for achieving a medium- or long-term goal. In particular, Bratman's agents use plans to constrain further deliberation about action, and thus, plans function in managing problems of prioritization. In introducing this more primitive idea of planning, I am circumscribing the deliberative strategy more tightly and thus, distinguishing it from Bratman's. See Michael Bratman, "Introduction: Planning Agents in a Social World," in *Faces of Intention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), 1-12.

and beyond instrumental reasoning.<sup>11</sup> Over the long haul, just randomly picking among options will not do. Arbitrarily made choices produce disorganization, wasted resources, and lost opportunities. The general of an invading army who just randomly picks from among his strategic options will undoubtedly lose the war. The same is true for individual agents. An early and apparently persuasive suggestion was that we figure out what to do by ranking our preferences. The idea was that individuals observe the strengths of their desires and rank them. The resulting list becomes the game plan for action.

In broad strokes, resistance to this type of approach has centered on the claim that desires can't generate that kind of list. Determining preference by the strengths of one's desires requires that the desires possess strength intrinsically. Some theorists have argued that there is no such feature to be found in the actual mixed bag of conative mental states that enter into practical deliberation.<sup>12</sup> Others have argued that the strength of desire is not a phenomenological feature of our desires.<sup>13</sup> If either claim can be maintained, desires cannot do the work they are called upon to perform in ranking preferences.<sup>14</sup> Another line

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<sup>11</sup> See Frederic Schick, "Dutch Bookies and Money Pumps," *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 112-119.

<sup>12</sup> Elijah Millgram gives a version of the argument in "Incommensurability and Practical Reasoning," in *Ethics Done Right: Practical Reasoning as a Foundation for Moral Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 274 ff.

<sup>13</sup> See Mark Platts, *Ways of Meaning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1997), 256; John McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 77-94; and David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life" in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. G. Sayre-McCord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 127-65.

<sup>14</sup> The concept "desire" invoked by contemporary instrumentalists is not best understood phenomenologically. Rather, it is a formal characterization of the relations between different aims and interests maintained by an individual. My purpose in revisiting the earlier debate is to sketch how discussion came to take its present form. For a



of attack suggests that, even if these problems can be put aside, closer examination of our desires (or goals) shows that they are “incommensurable.”<sup>15</sup> The claim here is that there is no set of standards by which one can evaluate and order all of one’s desires (or goals) decisively. The upshot, once again, is that, if this is the case, there are no facts about desires (or goals) that can determine preference.<sup>16</sup> According to each of these arguments, desires cannot be used to set priorities. Without adjudicating the success of these arguments, I will introduce a fresh line of attack, for I believe there are even more basic problems with the approach, and getting clear about those issues points the way to a more satisfying account of prioritizing.

### The Difficulties with Desires

Instrumentalist accounts of practical reasoning assume that finding the means to a particular goal allows for motivational transfer from the goal to the associated means. As goals and means proliferate, so too the individual’s motivation spreads out across a number of different options. It follows that individuals with a number of ends in view have instrumental reasons to carry out a number of actions leading toward any one of their goals. This explains the appeal to measuring the strengths of one’s desires. But the

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characterization of how a “sophisticated” instrumentalist construes the concept of desire, see Millgram, “Incommensurability,” 275 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Commensurability can be construed as an issue about the nature of desire or the value inherent in our goals. Characterizing the kind of difficulty that incommensurability presents to the idea of a preference order, however, does not require taking a side. I refer to both desire and goals in the text above as a way of acknowledging that different theorists will choose to cast the arguments differently.

<sup>16</sup> For a survey of this debate, see Chang, *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1-34.

strengths of our desires—assuming they have strengths—are remarkably unstable. They can and do change quickly, at a moment’s notice. This happens for any number of reasons. Frustration, boredom, anxiety, and stress distract us from what we are doing and lead us to new pursuits. New goals diminish the appeal of our present aims. Changes in circumstances provide us with different opportunities, and our desires follow and track these changes. As a result, the relative strengths of our desires are in constant flux.<sup>17</sup> If strength were the basis for prioritization, then, our priorities would be profoundly unstable. We have a real life example of this: adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Unable to control their impulses, persons with ADHD struggle to attain the stability needed to maintain long-term employment and to complete projects and ongoing tasks.<sup>18</sup> But individuals with this disorder do not suffer from the inability to reason instrumentally. The problem is that means-end reasoning itself has no resources for keeping one on a straight track. Setting stable priorities requires diminishing the influence that desires have on deliberation.<sup>19</sup> I will refer to this aspect of the prioritization problem as the *staying problem*.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The story of Jeremy with which I began this chapter is a well-known example of this.

<sup>18</sup> *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, “Symptoms of ADHD.”

<sup>19</sup> The deeper worry underlying the staying problem concerns the satisfaction of basic needs, both physical and social. We cannot expect the strengths of our desires on these issues to be any more stable than the others. Agents using that metric for decision are at risk of being unable to manage the basic tasks for which we generally take rational choice to be the solution. Candace Vogler makes a similar point in *Reasonably Vicious*, 19-20. She suggests that, given the “wildness of human wanting,” it might have been better, evolutionarily speaking, if we *weren’t* able to transfer motivation quite as easily as we do.

<sup>20</sup> I wrote earlier that some of the standard objections to preference ranking point out that strength is not an intrinsic feature of desire. My claim differs slightly: I concede (for the sake of argument) that desires have strengths intrinsically. My point is that they do not

We also encounter difficulties because of the number of both short- and long-term goals we have at a given time. The sheer number of options we typically have ends up overwhelming the decision-making process. There is the straightforward difficulty of tracking a large number of goals, but the trouble here is more than just a management problem. As options proliferate, determining an authentically felt preference is less likely, and the preference is more difficult to discern.<sup>21</sup> So there is also a problem of noticing minute differences in strength. Moreover, priorities must be informed by the expected probability of success, which is a variable that changes with circumstances.<sup>22</sup> Recent psychological data confirms that having too many choices available makes decision more difficult, leads individuals to resist making choices, or provokes them into making regrettable snap decisions.<sup>23</sup> I will call this aspect of the prioritization problem the

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generate stable preferences over time, nor could they be the basis of counterfactually based ranking. For all we know, ideal desires are as transient as actual desires. But even if we suppose that ideal desires are stable, they would still fall prey to the standard objections, and here I think they clearly are decisive. We cannot measure the strengths of hypothetical ideal desires.

<sup>21</sup> Harry Frankfurt makes a similar claim in “Rationality and the Unthinkable,” in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998), 177 ff. He suggests that “If the restrictions upon the choices that a person can make are loosened too far, he may become disoriented and uncertain about what and how to choose. Extensive proliferation of his options may weaken his grasp of his own identity. When he confronts the task of evaluating and ranking a large number of additional alternatives, his previously established appreciation of what his interests and priorities are may well become less decisive.”

<sup>22</sup> Decision often relies on expectations about how things will turn out, which are inherently unstable. This suggests that priorities should be conditional. The fact that evolving circumstances alter the predicted outcome means that individuals will want to change their bets over time.

<sup>23</sup> Tori DeAngelis, “Too Many Choices?” *Monitor on Psychology*, 35, (June 2004): 56.

*swamping problem*.<sup>24</sup>

Given these problems, it doesn't look like setting priorities can be achieved by evaluating the strengths of desires. That feature isn't stable enough to do the work required.<sup>25</sup> Thus, measuring strength just produces deliberative complications. As the swamping and staying problems show, generating priorities is about control. We need grounds for narrowing the set of motivationally live options under consideration. We also need a way of bringing deliberation to a close, and so evading consideration of new

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<sup>24</sup> There is an additional problem associated with prioritization that I won't take up directly in the text. Individuals often need to adjust their goals to circumstances, especially complex social circumstances. Means-end reasoning can change one's course of action, but it isn't built to manage rapid and complex change. It works best when goals are stable. When decision situations don't reflect that ideal, calculative reasoning takes up much needed cognitive resources. There may be ways to integrate the prospect of change into one's plans, but this presupposes that the changes coming are foreseeable. Change isn't always, or even usually, like that, and so there isn't a good way to plan for it. I will call this *the planning-for-change problem*. While solving it isn't strictly necessary for prioritizing, sophisticated deliberators will look for a solution to it. If one could integrate a solution to it into prioritization, it would be deliberatively valuable.

<sup>25</sup> The appeal of this idea comes, I believe, from considering what having priorities looks like *after* deliberation and decision are done. Once an individual sets an agenda, top priorities are more important. They have greater force going forward in decision-making. It is this that tempts us into thinking of importance as strength. It's equally plausible, however, to understand the importance of priorities as the *result* of deliberation, rather than a guiding consideration *during* deliberation. David Wiggins makes a similar observation in "Incommensurability: Four Proposals" in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. Ruth Chang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 53. He points out that "An overall ranking ... need not represent a complete or exhaustive valuation of the alternatives A and B, or a valuation of everything that really matters about each of them.... it is the choice of A ... that gives the ranking, not the ranking that gives the choice. The two-place predicate 'X is more choice worthy than Y' plays no deliberatively useful role. It sums up a deliberation effected by other means." Millgram also makes a similar point in "Incommensurability," 164. He suggests that "Over the course of one's deliberations, one constructs a conception of what matters, and in doing so, one may come to an understanding of some things mattering measurably more or less than others."

possibilities.<sup>26, 27</sup>

Another proposal has it that prioritization comes about through an individual's *identification* with certain goals or desires above and beyond others. Identification so construed comes about when an individual forms higher-order desires regarding his or

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<sup>26</sup> In reference to the planning-for-change problem, I want to point out that just as instrumental reasoning is not a good strategy for reacting to change, measuring the strengths of desires isn't either. One simply waits for the dust to settle and takes new measurements. If that were all we could do, then I suppose we would have to live with it. But we might hope for a better option, and it also might occur to some of us to look for one as well.

<sup>27</sup> Prioritization is not achieved through forming intentions. Having an intention to *X* upgrades a mere desire to *X* to actionable status, but that does not make *X-ing* a priority. We intend to do a lot of things, and without priorities our intentions get mired in the staying and swamping problems. Michael Bratman's characterization of having an intention as planning to *X* supposes otherwise. For him, the point of planning—and so the point of having an intention—is that it allows present deliberation to influence future action and to promote intra- and interpersonal coordination. This is because having a plan to *X* involves a level of commitment such that any course of action that is contradictory or inconsistent with the plan is, for that reason, put aside. “There are internal norms associated with the role of prior intentions in guiding further practical reasoning and planning. Central to these are the demands for means-end coherence and strong consistency, demands that are themselves rooted in a more fundamental concern with... desire-satisfaction. It is because of these demands that prior intentions... pose problems and constrain admissible options for such reasoning, thereby providing framework reasons: reasons whose role is to help determine the relevance and admissibility of options.” Michael Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 109. The idea is that we operate with a deliberative bias in favor of previously formed intentions and so resist reconsideration unless circumstances require it. “Intentions are, whereas ordinary desires are not, conduct-controlling pro-attitudes.” Bratman, *Intention*, 16. Bratmanian intentions arise within a “web of regularities and norms” that “are appropriate for agents for whom such planning plays a central role.” Bratman, *Intention*, 10. That is to say, Bratmanian agents push the problem of prioritization into the background psychology surrounding the formation of intention. Once you take something up as an intention, that signals that it has become a priority. Such an account of practical rationality does not tell us how we prioritize, it presupposes that we do. One way of coming to see this is to recognize that planning would not promote coordination or extend the influence of deliberation for agents that don't have priorities already. Later work suggests that Bratman came to see that more needed to be said on this matter. It is one of the motivations for his later work's emphasis on policy-based intentions, much of which appears in *Structures of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

her first-order desires about what goals to pursue.<sup>28</sup> As a further condition, the individual must be “satisfied” with the identification, where that signifies “an absence of restlessness or resistance” to the volitional state of affairs.<sup>29</sup>

Construing identification in this way misunderstands the structure of the staying and swamping problems and so leads to the wrong idea of what a good solution to those problems will be. Moving the focus of prioritization up to some higher-order level of desire with which one is satisfied is not a substantive way of responding to any of these problems’ distinctive features. The desires underlying identification and satisfaction are still unstable, not only at the first order but also at higher orders as well. Thus, identificational accounts do not address the staying problem at all. With regard to the swamping problem, there *might* be fewer higher-order desires, so the problem *might* not be quite as overwhelming, but there is nothing to show that this is necessarily the case. So while directing attention to identification *might* diminish the swamping problem, it might not.

More importantly, the notion of identification and the role that it is supposed to play in prioritization simply reintroduces the same strategy of measurement we saw fail earlier. Although the issue is not taken up in the literature, identifying with a desire is presumably a matter of degree. It follows that priorities will be set by ranking the strengths of identifications with first-order desires. This setup for a solution faces the

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<sup>28</sup> See Harry Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality” in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 58-68; Bratman, *Structures of Agency*; and J.D. Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> See Harry Frankfurt, “The Faintest Passion” in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 95-107.

same set of problems that preference ranking did. The move simply directs the measuring procedure at identification, rather than desire. But if it's true that the psychology of desire is too complicated to measure along the dimension of strength, we should expect the psychology of identification to be the same. Identifying with a desire is itself an obscure notion; if we can't clarify what it is exactly, measuring will be problematic. Moreover, we identify with different desires for different reasons, and I suspect, in different ways. Does it make sense to compare identifying with the desire to be loved with identifying with the desire to have a pleasant evening? If not, then issues of incommensurability will arise in the context of identification as well.<sup>30</sup>

Adherents of this type of view will likely reject this analysis. But if it's not strength that underwrites prioritizing through identification, it's not clear what *is* doing the work. Harry Frankfurt appeals to "satisfaction," as does Michael Bratman.<sup>31</sup> By fiat on the part of both philosophers, satisfaction is an all-or-nothing sentiment, so it isn't the concept with which the folk are familiar. But if that is how we ought to understand the concept, then satisfaction isn't the right kind of consideration to employ in setting priorities. An absence of resistance or restlessness with respect to a desire or a policy does not single it out as a priority. For one can be and usually is satisfied with a number of second-order desires and policies. All of the first-order desires thereby endorsed, in the

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<sup>30</sup> My argument rejects both identification-style accounts and strength-of-desire-style accounts without entering into the debate about whether or not desires, values, or goals are incommensurable. Incommensurability is surely a deep and interesting problem, but finding a solution to it is not the key to resolving the staying problem. The issues here are more basic than commensurability. Thus, we can put the debate about commensurability to one side.

<sup>31</sup> See Frankfurt, "Faintest Passion," 102-06; Michael Bratman, "Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency," in *Structures of Agency: Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21-46.

case of Frankfurt, and all of the actions in accord with an agent's policies, in the case of Bratman, have the same standing with respect to making a choice.<sup>32</sup> The all-or-nothing structure of satisfaction means that tracking just that feature doesn't yield clear priorities; it reveals a set of equally acceptable options regarding what to do. Agents deliberating in this way still have the work of prioritization left to do.

David Velleman claims that there is an irrevocable inclination to be in conscious control of what you're doing. Satisfying that desire grounds identification with a certain course of action. "Once you accept that you're going to do something, ... the inclination toward being in conscious control will reinforce your other motives for doing it."<sup>33</sup> This account simply ignores the problem. When an agent is deliberating about which course of action to choose, that just means she hasn't settled on a particular course of action yet. Accepting an action as the one to do *is* the deliberative problem. So on this account, the question of prioritization is swept under the rug.<sup>34</sup> As a further problem, he supposes that the extra motivation associated with the inclination to know what you're doing will always decide the matter. There isn't a clear reason to assume that's true, and so the

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<sup>32</sup> Bratman can and does appeal to the idea that prior policies constrain the adoption of new policies if they do not cohere or are not consistent with them. It's not clear that this solves the problem of setting priorities, since it's possible that one's actual policies endorse a number of potential courses of action. But the move is subject to the same kind of objections I offered against his earlier account of how prior intentions constrain the adoption of new intentions. See footnote 20 of this chapter for the arguments.

<sup>33</sup> David Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 196.

<sup>34</sup> Velleman might try to respond by saying that weighing of different considerations happens before adding the extra inclination to know what you're doing. But then it isn't one's acceptance of an act that is doing the decision-making; it is the strength or weight of one's inclinations. This is not in the spirit of his account and would otherwise be susceptible to the objections to this style of account I presented earlier.



account leads us back to a measuring problem.

These accounts depend on the thought that introducing these various structural features into the process of deliberation will reduce the number of possible actions enough to set priorities. It is not clear that they do, however, and the arguments are not there to clarify how they might. Indeed, these accounts seem to put the cart before the horse: they point us to a moment in deliberation when it is clear that an agent has priorities. Unfortunately, it is that very achievement that we are trying to understand.

A real solution to the prioritization problem will place limits on deliberation as well as motivational transfer. This requires refereeing between competing motivations, actions, and goals. Given the instability of both desire and circumstance, this is not likely to come about by merely evaluating one's motivational states. We need additional deliberative resources, and that suggests that we need a richer conceptual framework for thinking about deliberation. It also suggests that being able to prioritize involves engaging more fully with the *content* of deliberation. For placing a meaningful boundary around the set of options being considered will have to be sensitive to what those options actually are. Thus, adjudicating between different courses of action calls for relating one's decision to broader concerns. Taking these observations into consideration, I now turn to presenting my own strategy for prioritization.

### Making Progress with Prioritization

Plans are calculative structures generated by means-end reasoning. Since agents have a number of goals, means-end reasoning integrates distinct plans, putting in place a broader calculative framework. Temporally distant goals will mark the limits of that

framework. Plans are also gappy. Not every step of the way is filled in, especially at a distance. But agents tend to have a basic sense of how to achieve even long-term goals. Instrumental reasons for action track this partially integrated, gappy calculative structure. Acknowledging that we update our long-term goals and plans going forward, our general plans adapt to these changes.<sup>35</sup>

This calculative structure is central to my recommendation for how to set priorities.<sup>36</sup> The overall calculative framework of our general plans represents a practical ideal, anchored by one's final ends. Final ends possess a deep significance; they are life-size ambitions, and so we keep them in view as we make the smaller decisions of our life. As long-term goals undergo alteration, the details of one's plans and aspects of one's

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<sup>35</sup> This signals an important contrast with Bratman's theory of planning. For Bratman, plans permit present deliberation to influence the future, thereby promoting intra- and interpersonal coordination over time. But while acknowledging that plans are not irrevocable, he does not seem to see that that fact threatens the rationale for planning in the long-term. As plans get temporally distant, it is unlikely that they will remain intact, and so present plans will probably not influence future action. This is true even if we accept that having a plan amounts to having an intention. I have not identified the two in this chapter. My suggestion is that long-term plans serve present deliberation about what to do. Thus they influence present action more than the future. Using elements of one's broader agenda in present-directed decision-making promotes agential unity in the context of local decision-making and action. Bratman seems to think that more local agential unity is just a step on the way to broader temporal consistency and coherence. I'm not denying this. I do, however, take local agential unity to be an independent concern, one which provides the grounds for temporal consistency and coherence; for that reason, it is a greater deliberative concern in our practical thinking. Thus, it is not the same concern that Bratman has in mind in discussing coordination. For his discussion, see Bratman, *Intention*, 2-13.

<sup>36</sup> The first step in setting priorities is limiting options to those that are appropriate to the circumstances. Millgram argues that figuring out what matters is a function of experience, and so adjudicating deliberative dilemmas is a function of experience. By extension, learning to match goals with an environment also comes with experience. Thus, evaluating the fit between environments and goals will reflect how things worked in the past. For his general discussion, see *Practical Induction*. For his discussion of how developmental influences can work to either resolve or preclude deliberative dilemmas, see "Incommensurability."

practical ideal change with them. But we tend to abandon life-size ambitions piecemeal. It is rare (and risky) for a person to initiate and undergo a practical revolution. Thus, modifications at a distance typically leave broad features of the plans and the ideal intact; for that reason, the calculative structure of plans retains a certain stability despite progressive emendation. Furthermore, change at a distance tends to cause less deliberative upheaval. Just as movement at a distance looks smaller than it is, so it is with goals. Stars look as if they move at slow pace; the amount of distance covered in order to create the impression is vast. In the same way, deciding to retire at 70 rather than 65 seems like a small concession from 30 years out, but it will change one's long-term plans significantly.<sup>37</sup>

Individuals can use this calculative framework for prioritizing because of its stability. To see how, let's revert back to my earlier discussion of the staying and swamping problems. Recall that both problems are the result of the inherent instabilities surrounding instrumental deliberation. The staying problem is a function of transient desires disrupting the decision-making process, and the swamping problem arises because of a high number of motivationally live options. Means-end reasoning cannot enforce a decisive path because, from that perspective, there are no rational grounds for doing so. Yet the broader calculative framework of our general plans possesses a greater stability. Focusing attention on that framework can serve to counteract the instability of more local concerns and interests.

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<sup>37</sup> It's worth pointing out that long-term plans resist analysis in terms of preference ranking. We don't decide whether family life is more important than having a successful career unless circumstances force the issue. Moments of crisis in which important goals conflict are exactly that: moments. Until they arise, individuals put the question of which investment goes deeper to one side. This is true even in conjunction with the fact that most people have a core set of ends in which they make a heavier investment.

The process begins by directing attention to subgoals located in the medium-to-long-term portions of one's calculative framework. Given the circumstances, some will be pertinent to the present deliberative dilemma. These subgoals can function as principles of exclusion limiting the options presently under consideration. They exclude current options either because a course of action does not promote that subgoal or because temporal considerations recommend against the option. Let us look at an example.

Arriving at work one morning, Anna is beset with a number of tasks. There are three or four projects coming due at her job, and the list of things to do is overwhelming. She is worried that she will not get everything done on time. It is not efficient to just start hacking away, since the tasks are associated with different projects. Thinking it will look more professional to have completed at least some of the work rather than having several incomplete tasks that are almost done, she prioritizes with a view to having something final to hand over to her boss. With that in mind, she excludes all tasks not associated with completing the shortest project. But there are still a number of tasks to consider. She is recovering from a cold, and so she will not have her best foot forward in reaching out to professional contacts and negotiating with coworkers. So her best bet is to have a quiet day at her desk doing research. There are a couple of topics in need of further elaboration, but given her anxiety about getting all of her work done, it is best to focus on an area of research that overlaps with another project. So she chooses to begin working on that task. Unfortunately, the company announces massive layoffs a few days later, and Anna is one of the unlucky employees. She leaves the job without ever completing any of the projects. She is not too unlucky, however. The expertise she has acquired in working on these projects makes her an asset to her previous employer's biggest competitor. She is working away at her new job within a couple of weeks after being laid off.

Notice that Anna's set of decisions is not required by the goal of completing her projects. She could have chosen otherwise and achieved both the subgoals *and* the long-term goal. She will probably face a similar dilemma in the future, and nothing about her circumstances will dictate making the same set of choices. She is also not ranking either her larger aspirations or her present options. She does not compare her goal of being

professional and her goal of networking successfully, and then decide that being professional is more important. Reflecting on subgoals relevant to the decision, she encounters considerations that will help her prioritize by enabling her to exclude options. She doesn't integrate these considerations; they are one-off criteria for excluding options quickly and easily. But the appeal to these considerations is not ad hoc. They link the present decision up to larger and more important goals that guide Anna in this arena of her life. This is an important feature of the strategy, for just as utilizing a strategy of picking a random option when faced with a deliberative dilemma is counterproductive to achieving one's goals, so too, just picking a random subgoal from one's larger plans is not likely to produce priorities that make sense in a specific realm of decision-making.<sup>38</sup>

Instead of integrating plans for all of the work she must complete, she looks to salient aspirations, namely professionalism, networking, and productivity. This doesn't follow a stepwise procedure: it is not in virtue of any relation between these aspirations

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<sup>38</sup> In *Practical Induction*, Millgram argues that individuals generate "somewhat general practical judgments" based on considerations "at hand" to limit their deliberative options and so solve the problem of prioritization. These judgments "connect" the deliberative options by introducing a further judgment that can allow a resolution to the dilemma. Thus, prioritization arises out of "ad hoc" practical induction. *Practical Induction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 60-61. The argument he offers is crucial for his broader defense of practical induction, since he claims that using judgments arising from any other source in making these decisions will undermine agential unity. Without agential unity, agents like us will be unable to carry out plans for the future. Practical induction, then, is the linchpin holding us together and allowing us to obtain future goals. This conclusion confers legitimacy on practical induction as a strategy of practical reasoning. Judgments based on self-directed prioritization initially appear to be a counter-example to that claim. To the extent that prioritization is grounded on the calculative framework of one's general plans, it can solve deliberative dilemmas in a way that unifies the agent. This is because they are a function of an agent's motivationally live aspirations, rather than induction over considerations that happen to be on hand at the time of decision. The arguments I offer in defense of self-directed prioritization thus seem to present a serious problem for Millgram's view. See *Practical Induction*, 59-63, 67-86.

that she appeals to them in sequence or at all. The criteria she uses in coming to the decision could be replaced. And if other considerations within her calculative framework were to become salient in her decision-making, different options would have been excluded and she could have settled on a different course of action.

These considerations make it clear that Anna's strategy is not means-end reasoning. Appeal to her general plans does not proceed in a linear fashion from a given goal to a present course of action. The subgoals she appeals to are not tied together under a single, unifying end. Still, the option she chooses does emerge from within the calculative framework of Anna's general plans, and when we look at what she does after the fact, it *looks* as if she is taking the means to her end. Of course, if prioritization is going well, it *should* look like that. After all, the initial set of options are all means-end coherent. The subgoals used to prioritize are elements in one's larger plans, and what ends up happening displays calculative structure. None of this, however, looks to the form of thought that Anna carries out, and the story I told about her thinking is not strange or unfamiliar. Insisting that, because what happened looks calculative, she must be reasoning instrumentally is to maintain that the only kind of reasoning we can carry out with respect to the calculative structure of action is instrumental. However, the fact that actions are often—or even always—structured calculatively isn't an adequate basis for thinking that our practical reasoning skills are so impoverished.

Means-end reasoning generates the calculative framework, but that doesn't imply that this is the only way to reason about it, or with it. Once it's there, we can use the structure in a variety of ways. Since prioritizing differs from finding the means to an end as a deliberative problem, we should expect that how we go about solving it is

distinguishable from means-end reasoning. A similar point can be made about language: grammar has a definite structure, but we exploit it in a range of ways to serve our purposes. For instance, it's an orthographical convention that we write English from left-to-right, but grammar doesn't require it. We could do it right-to-left. In fact, we flout that convention for semantic effect all the time. Think about advertising; flouting conventions works precisely because we still understand the message. Just as we can use alternative strategies for navigating grammatical structure, so too we can traverse the calculative structure of a prospective action in different ways.

It will be useful to be clear about when long-term goals function instrumentally and when they are working to set priorities. So I will refer to them as *aspirations* when discussing their work in strategies of prioritization. Because Anna's strategy for decision looks to the broader plans she has in view, I call the strategy *self-directed prioritization*.<sup>39</sup>

The approach has noticeable payoffs. Operating within the calculative structure laid out by available aspirations and plans, the decision sidesteps difficult questions about value, and we evade the problem of ruminating about what we "really" want. Deliberative strategies that lead us in this direction are nonstarters: knowing what we really want is a sign that one isn't dealing with a deliberative *dilemma*. Moreover, using preestablished aspirations and plans as deliberative constraints guarantees broad means-end coherence, since the choice fits within one's broader life plans. Finally, and as a way of counteracting the instability of the staying and swamping problems, the deliberative strategy loads motivation associated with discrete long-term goals onto the selection made. Thus, the chosen course of action is well situated to override the inclination of the

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<sup>39</sup> For stylistic reasons, I will sometime shorten the term to "self-direction."

moment, and so agents deliberating in this way can overcome the staying problem. By the same token, self-directed prioritization is a solution to the swamping problem as well. With motivation weighted in favor of a particular course of action, the temptation to move between various instrumentally justified courses of action evaporates.<sup>40</sup>

It might be tempting to maintain that self-directed prioritization is just a form of instrumental plan integration. It certainly does have the effect of integrating plans, but it doesn't accomplish that by way of means-end reasoning. Anna is not in a position to say how her present research will be a means to some future end. Self-direction indicates that her choice will fit within her later plans, and that's enough of a reason to keep the option live in current deliberation. Instead of focusing on constructing a clear path to a goal or set of goals, we shave away options that we can predict should not be on that path. Self-directed prioritization is a strategic shortcut we employ to evade the job of full-plan integration. It's less expensive than constructing plans and integrating them, cognitively speaking. This is a welcome advantage because circumstances may well change, and self-directed prioritization allows us to be more flexible.

Once self-direction solves the deliberative problem of setting priorities, there is nothing to prohibit us from appropriating the language of preference. For having settled on a course of action that serves one's aspirations *and* functions instrumentally, it *is* your preference for action. That a preference has emerged, however, is not itself evidence of

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<sup>40</sup> Self-directed prioritization also solves the planning-for-change problem. Since the strategy imposes deliberative constraints progressively, deliberators can remove them piecemeal as well, thereby shifting deliberation in a way that is sensitive to the actual changes in circumstance encountered. Finding her mood to be improving, Anna can turn to negotiation with coworkers later in the day but continue working on the same project and the same research area. Not all previous deliberation is put aside. Rather, we attend to the dimension of the situation that has changed.



how it came to be. On my account, figuring out what to do through self-direction is how we arrive at our preferences. The practical ideal constructed by one's long-term goals and plans is the source of one's motivation. As I have pointed out, not even these commitments are irrevocable. The substance of our practical ideals evolve over time. What does remain stable, however, is having *some* practical ideal. Thus, the resources for self-directed prioritization are consistently available.

### Letting Go of Long-term Goals

I have argued that we need a strategy of prioritization and have just presented an account of how that strategy might work. In doing so, I am claiming that long-term goals serve two deliberative functions. We are now in a position to ask which of these functions is more important from the standpoint of successful deliberation. Philosophers have traditionally assumed that the central and most important function of a goal is its instrumental one because, operating in this way, deliberation leads to attaining the goal in question. Reflection on the role that prioritization plays in effective decision and action should make us think twice about that.

I have been emphasizing throughout this chapter that people abandon long-term goals more often than not. The default explanation for this behavior has always been that desire is arational, and so our intentions and goals are vulnerable. Given the source of the problem, philosophers presumed that nothing could be done to fix it. We are left with the conclusion that, when change arrives, we have to let it happen, leaving the effort and energy that went into bygone aims to be counted as a loss.

But the explanation is not a satisfying one. For if it is true that we abandon the

large majority of long-term goals over our life spans, we need an explanation for why we invest energy and resources into pursuing them. If we're going to abandon them, what's the point? The question becomes even more puzzling when we consider that our long-term goals are typically our most important goals. And acting in the pursuit of them is something we care a great deal about.

Moreover, when we assume that achieving our goals is all that matters, we assume that the construction of plans for achieving them is the foundation of agential organization and unity over time; but if we take the fact that we abandon goals seriously, accounting for agential unity in this way doesn't make sense. Knowing that attitudes and circumstances change, we *shouldn't* be moved to pursue long-term goals, and we *shouldn't* construct plans leading to them. Thus, the central source of our agential unity *evaporates*.

Coming to see that long-term goals operate in present decision through deliberation about our current priorities resolves these difficulties. Self-directed prioritization highlights the role that long-term goals play in figuring out what to do now. We should not underestimate the significance of this. It is a consideration of primary importance. Figuring out what to do is the basis for making instrumental reasoning useful. If we can't choose an action and proceed toward an end, reasoning instrumentally about action is a waste of time. More sophisticated plans don't get off the ground at all, and very few goals will be achieved in the short, medium, or long term. From the standpoint of agential success, having priorities trumps getting the goal.

Generating priorities is a reason to have long-term goals that does not involve achieving them, since their function as aspirations does not call for achieving them as

goals. Self-direction does not require it. Yet there is reason to articulate long-term goals so as to drive prioritization. My account, therefore, provides a way to acknowledge that we abandon long-term goals and embrace the need to have them anyway. Here's an example:

Arriving at the local library, I might wander aimlessly for a while, but eventually I direct myself toward the subjects that interest me. These things tend to line up with bigger and broader goals. Perhaps I'd like to read all of Dickens' novels, so I pick a new one up. I would also like to learn how to repair my bicycle by myself, and then it occurs to me that I should balance things out with something "light." This is how I figure out how to make my way through the collection.<sup>41</sup> I bring the books home, and maybe I read them all the way through, and maybe I don't. I now know that Dickens is too depressing sometimes, and I don't have the patience to figure out bike mechanics. But detective novels are fun.

However it turns out, the choices I made at the library still made sense. The fact that I won't read all of Dickens' novels doesn't make reading this one a waste of time. Knowing that I'm less of a fan than I thought means that I'll look to find new authors, and my satisfaction with the detective novel points me in a good direction. I certainly will never learn how to fix my bike, so now I have to decide: take it to the shop, or give up bicycling.

The example shows that we resolve the tension between having goals and abandoning them by learning something from the pursuit of them. Knowing that my prior interest in Dickens and bikes has waned, I'll look for different books next time. I'll make those decisions by looking to other interests revealed by my—now altered—practical

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<sup>41</sup> Let me stipulate that the decisions about where to go in the library were made on the basis of self-direction. So for instance, I didn't figure out that I wanted to read Czeslaw Milosz's poetry more than I wanted to read David Hume's essays, but that I wanted to read Dickens even more. I looked at all of these goals, and using the fact that the Dickens project will take longer than the others, I took that as a (self-directed) reason to start on it now.

ideal. I haven't lost a sense of agential unity because I'm not going to read Dickens anymore. I am unified on the basis of new interests going forward. What this shows is that the primary deliberative concern is the relation between present action and practical ideal, rather than means to an end.

So practical reasoning—on my account—does not require committing to achieving long-term goals. We commit to long-term goals for now. Given the way our lives progress, however, it does not make sense to extend that commitment out to the distant future; and so that sort of commitment is not the source of our agential unity. Rather, it is bringing short- and long-term motivation into alignment with one another that creates agential unity. Calling upon one's aspirations in the course of a current decision, one invokes real commitments, and the course of action chosen reflects that fact. Leaving the library, I am happy with my choices and pleased that I am working toward larger goals. Taking ourselves to be temporally extended agents and using that to manage our lives is what provides the unity. The point of doing so attaches first to local success and only incidentally to long-term commitment. Evolving practical ideals, flexible plans, and being able to set priorities for effective action give us all the unity that we need.

### Defending Prioritization Against Instrumentalist Dogma

We have now seen how self-directed prioritization works. Self-directed agents make choices on the basis of the calculative framework of their practical ideal. Those choices are grounded on motivationally powerful considerations that emerge from the broadest and most stable aspects of their practical agenda. Recognizing that goals

function in this way helps to resolve tensions between the reality of abandoning long-term goals and the picture of practical rationality endorsed by instrumentalism. An important upshot of that explanation is that achieving one's long-term goals is not a requirement of practical rationality, and abandoning goals is not always a practical failure of some sort. It is now time to address what will likely be the most damaging response to my proposal: opponents will try to construe self-direction as an instrumental form of plan integration. My response to this objection comes in three stages. The core idea of the argument is that no plan of any temporal duration can be successful without prioritization skills in place. If you can carry out plans, you're *already* prioritizing.

My opponent will argue that self-direction is best understood as an instance of filling in the details of our plans, choosing actions that work toward as many goals as possible, and filtering out conflicts. When we encounter serious dilemmas about what to do, instrumentalists will claim that we look for a solution to the dilemma as a means to satisfying the goal of resolving the dilemma. Put another way, when determining a priority is a practical problem, coming up with one becomes a goal. Much like any other goal, we calculate the means to it.

To see why this doesn't work, recall that there are innumerable possible prioritization strategies. Some are strictly formal: choose the most accessible option, choose the least accessible option, choose the action that leads to the nearest goal, choose the option that leads to the most distant end, etc. There are also strategies that make recommendations on the basis of the particular goals: choose the action that your mother thinks best, choose the "coolest" action, choose the action allowing the greatest amount of socializing, etc. Many of these can probably be dismissed quickly (e.g., too arbitrary,

too whimsical, too impractical, etc.), but a great many strategies can and will present themselves for serious consideration. For instance, individuals can choose to prioritize goals in different areas of their lives. Financial, professional, intellectual, spiritual, physical, familial, and social goals can all make a reasonable claim for special attention.<sup>42</sup> Since there is no strategy for prioritizing in place, the staying problem asserts itself. The inclination to focus on one set of priorities will come and go; the strategy used now cedes to another more appealing strategy, which in turn gives way to the next, and so on. As a result, the deliberator becomes swamped. New options also present themselves, and that produces an even greater organizational problem. Given the numerous options, it's unlikely that an individual will have a decisive preference. Consider: it makes sense to say that I prefer reading philosophy to reading poetry. I like both, however, so I aim to have both on my reading list. It's not quite as obvious that I have a preference between reading philosophy in the morning and poetry at night, switching between the two every day, or spending 2 hours on philosophy for every 1 hour spent reading poetry, or interspersing short poetry readings between longer philosophy chapters and/or articles, or spending the weekdays on philosophy and the weekends on poetry, or ..... The goal of prioritizing doesn't produce priorities: it reproduces the problem. Thus, a straightforward instrumentalist approach to prioritization does not work.

The reader will notice that my argument actually cedes more to my opponent than necessary. For assuming that there is no prioritization strategy in place, the goal of

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<sup>42</sup> This list comes from what one website informs me are "the broad categories of life." A quick search on the internet reveals that there are popularly taken to be anywhere from seven to fifteen categories of life, and so, depending on how complicated an individual's life is, there can be between seven and fifteen areas of life to consider prioritizing. For the list above, see scribd.com, "The Broad Categories of Life," accessed May 26, 2012, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/2414441/The-Broad-Categories-of-Life>.

prioritizing is not yet a priority, and the argument above tacitly allows that it could become one without a strategy already in place. This is actually false. Agents without a prioritization strategy will only work on the problem when inclination compels them to do so. Since it's difficult, they will probably be inclined to walk away from the problem frequently.

Taking a different tack, my opponent might concede that the calculative framework of general plans is a means to finding a priority. Coming to have one, then, will be a clear subgoal of prioritization. One could argue that we pursue that goal instrumentally, and having achieved it, we use it as the means to achieving the goal of prioritization (however that might go). While self-direction itself might not be an instance of calculative reasoning, self-directing for the sake of determining a priority is an instance of means-end reasoning. Thus, my opponent hopes to capture self-directed prioritization inside a calculative “net” by pointing out a “deeper sense” in which instrumental reasoning remains fundamental.<sup>43</sup>

The problem with this tack is much the same as the one we have just seen. Individuals without priorities will not be able to construct the calculative framework underlying general plans; for doing so is a challenging and time-consuming job. It involves, among other things, coming to recognize the enduring motivational reality of distinctive long-term goals, even in the midst of unstable preferences and inclinations. It requires the attention and cognitive ability to foster an understanding of the practical relations between goals and forming long-term plans. These plans must be stable enough to operate as components in the calculative framework as well.

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<sup>43</sup> This is, I take it, the move Candace Vogler makes in *Reasonably Vicious*, although her aim is to illustrate that specificationist reasoning is caught in a similar calculative “net.”

Moreover, a practical ideal can generate priorities only if the aspirations from which it arises represent genuine practical interests at the time of decision. The constraints it provides must look to the individual like legitimate reasons to narrow one's set of options. They cannot be goals set in place for the purpose of prioritizing merely. Having or choosing ends requires experience and personal insight, and these things take time. Thus, the work of constructing a practical ideal is vulnerable to the staying and swamping problems as well. For that reason, it cannot function as a subgoal in an instrumental pursuit of prioritization.

My argument does not hang on the assumption that individuals without a prioritization strategy are unable to grasp the benefit of having one. They may see that the calculative structure of general plans would serve exactly that purpose. But without the tools for steadily pursuing that goal, they will wander away before completing the task or shift between courses of action that are intended to achieve the goal. Exactly the same thing is true for the long-term goals needed to generate aspirations. Individuals without priorities will not hold fast to goals that could become components of a broader calculative structure. Either way, achieving the purported goal is undermined. The problem is not whether or not an individual consciously takes up the goal of setting priorities. Rather, it is one of being unable to follow through on those aims with a steady, consistent course of action long enough to succeed.

Both of these arguments have a single lesson. Pursuits that extend over time are pointless unless one has the ability to prioritize. I showed earlier that short-term instrumental success relied on having priorities, and it is now clear that this is true of long-term aims as well. The extent to which we accomplish goals at all, then, is a sign



that we do more than reason instrumentally. For agents like us, the success of means-end reasoning *depends* on deliberative skills involving prioritization. This is not a matter of *what* we deliberate about. Rather, it's an observation about the natural limitations of calculative reasoning.

Another instrumentalist response to self-direction would construe it as a special case of the “maieutic ends” put forward by David Schmidtz. Maieutic ends have as their object the directive to set other final ends. So for instance, the goal of choosing a career is a maieutic end in that it directs one to settle on a particular career, which is itself a final end. Prioritization, it might be suggested, is another instance of this structure; the maieutic end of having priorities justifies a given strategy of prioritization. However, the point I'm making is that, if you can't maintain the goal of choosing a career as a priority, then you won't end up choosing one. If you can maintain the goal as a priority, then you already have a solution to the prioritization problem.<sup>44</sup>

If the conclusion at which I just arrived withstands further scrutiny, it will be significant for current debate in practical rationality. For right now, I'm focused on distinguishing self-directed prioritization and plan integration. Plan integration is thought to be a matter of intrapersonal coordination. We modify our plans with a view to constructing a harmonious whole out of the many. We remove inconsistencies and

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<sup>44</sup> See “Choosing Ends” in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, ed. Elijah Millgram (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 237-257. Another similar response would be that the goal of having priorities could justify “just picking” a prioritization strategy. It's not clear that it will make sense to manage the problem in this way. For instance, if the maieutic end is choosing a career, then the goal would justify deciding to be a circus clown or a doctor, but we typically want decisions to stand on firmer grounds than that. Self-direction gives us exactly that, justifying the particular choice of the individual by reference to the individual's practical ideal, e.g., I'm going to be a circus clown because I don't want my life to be filled with serious responsibilities.

construct sequences of actions on the basis of all the plans we have in view. The assumption is often made that the guiding consideration of plan integration is efficiency. What that really means is that people assume that efficiency is a priority in our lives. As an absolute claim, that's probably false. We certainly can prioritize other concerns.<sup>45</sup> What's relevant here is that, even if plan integration is about "efficiency," that imperative rings hollow when no set of priorities points to the consideration that ought to be maximized. Being "efficient" is about achieving the most important goals in the fastest possible way while making the least number of sacrifices. The reason that plan integration is not the same thing as self-directed prioritization is that the latter determines not only the important things but also the sacrifices. And so, again, prioritization *precedes* calculative processing.

To claim that finding a preference cannot happen through evaluating the strengths of desires or one's identification or satisfaction with a first order desire is controversial. Even more so is what follows: since instrumental reasoning can be effective only when a priority is in place, and such reasoning does not produce priorities, there *must* be some additional deliberative strategy which accounts for the obvious success of our practice of planning. I believe that the arguments I have put forward make a good case for accepting self-directed prioritization as strategy for doing so. I don't expect that to be the predominant reaction to these proposals. For that reason, I am content to point out that, if means-end reasoning can prioritize, the process will be too slow to meet our deadlines for

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<sup>45</sup> Taking a stand here leads to familiar arguments about whether the gesture at efficiency is a descriptive or normative one. Entering into that debate doesn't serve my present purpose. See Christine M. Korsgaard, "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason." In *Ethics and Practical Reason*, ed. G. Gaut and B. Cullity (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

decision, and it will be cognitively expensive. Having deliberative skills that minimize the cost would be valuable. Self-prioritization makes use of skills that we know we already have. It takes less time and less energy to produce a priority in this manner. It is, therefore, a legitimate competitor to the standard view of how we make decisions about what to do now.

### Conclusion

The arguments in this chapter lay the groundwork for a new vision of our practical stance. My approach focuses deliberation, agency, *and* action on local rather than distant concerns, arguing that deliberation about the future serves primarily in local decision. The account of prioritization on offer also liberates us from the problem of preference ranking and Frankfurt-style accounts of identifying with a desire. This leads to a reassessment of the function of means-end reasoning and an expansion of the notion of a “goal.” With that accomplished, we finally have an account of practical reasoning that does not sweep the facts about abandoning goals aside, construing it as wastefulness.

In addition, the position I have outlined suggests taking a very different approach to debate about instrumentalism. By introducing the construct of a practical ideal, it also promises to give insight into questions of self-knowledge and personal identity that emerge in relation to practical reasoning. My hope is that it can also be a vehicle for illuminating related notions about practical identity in the field.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Looking to the calculative structure of plans can help to develop a clearer understanding of Christine Korsgaard’s “practical identity,” Martha Nussbaum’s “narratives,” Charles Taylor’s “leading a life,” and David Velleman’s “practical self-knowledge.” Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 100-108; Martha Nussbaum, “Narrative

In upcoming chapters, I'll take a look at how other accounts characterize the role of the calculative structure in practical reasoning. We'll find that even philosophers who emphasize its centrality resist the otherwise appealing thought that agents like us can exploit it in more than one way. I'll use these discussions as further grounds for recommending a revision of the core conceptual framework of practical rationality, but also as investigations into the ways in which thinking about prioritization can inform current debate. In the next chapter, I'll take up contemporary Kantian moral philosophy. Although this is certainly not an instrumentalist position, it does adhere to the basic assumptions about means-end reasoning that I have been discussing. Critiquing the New Kantians' work provides an opportunity to illustrate how confusions about practical commitment undermine their conception of intention. This creates a serious problem for their interpretation of Kant, and my conclusion will be that we must reject it. In the following chapter, I'll address recent work being done in the philosophy of action. Looking at the work of Michael Thompson, I'll argue that, while his focus on the basic structure of action yields valuable insights, it cannot provide an adequate account of reasoning about action. Taken together, these discussions amount to a larger argument for turning our attention to an investigation of practical commitment, and how it informs practical thinking in general.

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Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love." In *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 286-313; Charles Taylor, "Leading a Life" ed. Ruth Chang, *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, 170-183.

## CHAPTER III

### CAN THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE TEST FINAL ENDS?

Now that my account of prioritization is in place, I can begin the work of illustrating the consequences it has for discussion of practical rationality and normative moral theory. Looking to the work of the New Kantians allows me to do both. Grounded in the work of John Rawls, these philosophers—most notably Christine Korsgaard, Onora O’Neill, and Barbara Herman—base their account of Kantian moral philosophy on what they refer to as the “practical interpretation” of the Categorical Imperative.<sup>47</sup> Recent publications by Korsgaard make her a prime target, but my arguments in this chapter focus on general features of the position. So my refutation of the view applies to all theorists endorsing those claims. Rather than working through the arguments to show that the account falls prey to the prioritization problem, the focus here will be on my claims

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<sup>47</sup> While each of these philosophers puts forward a distinctive philosophical account, they overlap on the core elements of this interpretation. My purpose is to focus on those commitments, so I will not be addressing the details of each position. See Onoral O’Neill, *Acting on Principle* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1975), published under the name Onora Nell; Christine Korsgaard, *The Standpoint of Practical Reason* (New York, NY: Garland Press, 1990). Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009). Barbara Herman, on the other hand, distances herself from the orthodoxy somewhat. She presents a serious problem for the position in her essay, “Moral Deliberation and the Derivation of Duties,” in *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 132-158. Still, she does not forego the philosophical commitments about intention that are my concern in this paper.

about practical commitment. As we know, commitment to our final ends does not tend to endure generally speaking, and this affects how we think about long-term intentions. Current theorists working in both normative ethics and practical reasoning will have to integrate these considerations into their understanding of deliberation, decision, and ethical judgment.

In her recent book, *Self-Constitution*, Korsgaard tells us that moral philosophers see efficacy as the primary standard for the assessment of action.<sup>48</sup> She takes issue with that criterion, and points toward “self-constitution” as the aim of action: “You constitute yourself as the author of your action in the very act of choosing it. I am proposing that this, not production as Mill thought, is what action is.”<sup>49</sup> We might expect her to abandon efficacy altogether, but we quickly see that nothing so radical will be forthcoming. For Korsgaard, constituting oneself as the author of one’s action involves identifying with *all* elements of an action’s principle, including the end.<sup>50</sup> Thus, attempting to achieve the end is a *component* of constituting ourselves as agents. Efficacy therefore remains a criterion of a successful self-constitutive action.

My resistance to the conception of action as production is more thoroughgoing. As I have argued, with respect to actions directed at one’s long-term goals, achieving the end is *not* an essential component of successful action. The way in which we manage our long-term goals bears this out. Since this is a pattern in the way people manage long-term intentions, it does not make sense to construe those intentions as full-blooded

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<sup>48</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 25. As Korsgaard’s notion of production is “the thought that action’s purpose is to effect an end,” I characterize it as a criterion of efficacy in the assessment of action.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 11.

commitments to achieving the end. At the same time, I have emphasized that we use long-term plans and goals to solve the prioritization problem. They function as deliberative constraints on current decision-making, enabling us to resolve deliberative dilemmas, and so to determine a course of action. Because long-term goals can help us solve these problems, it makes sense for us to have them. Given the benefits of acting in accordance with long-term plans, pursuing them in present action is a rational solution to figuring out what to do now, *regardless* of whether you achieve the purported goal in the long run. Efficacy is, therefore, not an appropriate criterion for judging actions carried out for the sake of a long-term goal. Failing to acknowledge this constitutes a misunderstanding about the practical commitment we make to long-term goals.

These considerations undermine the practical interpretation of the Categorical Imperative, typically referred to as the CI-procedure. Because the view does not take the temporality of commitment into account, it turns on a false picture of long-term intentions. If having an intention does not necessarily include a commitment to achieving the end, the prospect of failure does not have the kind of significance that the practical interpretation claims for it.

### Characterizing the CI-Procedure

I'll begin by presenting the details of the practical interpretation and proceed to my critique of the position afterwards. The New Kantians refer to the method that agents are to use in evaluating the moral and rational status of an action as the "CI-procedure."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Discussion in this section draws heavily on O'Neil's explication in O'Neill, *Principle*, 59-83. Korsgaard outlines O'Neill's work in Korsgaard, *Standpoint*. More recently, O'Neill revises her position regarding the true object of the CI-procedure, claiming that

Evaluation centers on one's principle of action, or maxim, which guides one's performance of it. Those not rejected by the CI-procedure are morally permissible.

On the New Kantian account, it is an individual's intention that underwrites the formation of a maxim. A proper intention—one that can be a candidate for evaluation by the CI-procedure—must meet the following requirements: (i) the agent must expect that a proposed course of action will achieve the given end, and (ii) she must see herself as being able to carry out the action. These conditions are combined with a traditional understanding of intention according to which (iii) having an intention implies a full commitment to achieving the end. In the preface to *Self-Constitution*, Korsgaard writes:

A good action is one that constitutes its agent as the autonomous and *efficacious* cause of her own movements. ... Conformity to the categorical imperative renders us autonomous, and conformity to the hypothetical imperative renders us *efficacious*. These imperatives are therefore constitutive principles of action, principles to which we necessarily are trying to conform insofar as we are acting at all.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, for the New Kantians, an intention can be judged as rational just in case the agent *expects* and *believes* that carrying out the intention will be successful, *and* the agent is *committed* to realizing success. Taken together, these considerations have been referred

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one directs the CI-procedure at “*those underlying principles or intentions by which we guide and control our more specific intentions*.” O’Neill, Onora, “Consistency in Action,” in *Varieties of Practical Reason*, ed. Elijah Millgram (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 305. This has consequences for the resulting picture of Kantian ethics, but I will not address these issues, since the move does not undercut my concerns about intention. Whether we are assessing deep or surface intentions, the basic notion of an intention remains the same.

<sup>52</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, xii, emphasis added. For a discussion of the traditional understanding of intention, see Harman, G., “Practical Reasoning,” *Review of Metaphysics* 29, no. 3 (March 1976): 432-63; H.P. Grice, “Intention and Uncertainty,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 57 (1971) 263-279.



to as the “success condition.”<sup>53</sup>

In evaluating one’s intention as a maxim, the CI-procedure requires that an intention have a certain form, providing both a description of the action and its purpose.

Korsgaard characterizes it this way:

Since the connection between means and end is a connection of sufficient cause to effect, *one must include in the statement of the maxim all and only what is genuinely relevant to the production of the effect—the purpose—in the given circumstances*. A maxim is a proposed justification of the action; and it is the connection between the action and the purpose that is supposed to justify the action. This connection is what Kant calls the “form” of the maxim.<sup>54</sup>

Here’s an example: to fish upstream if you’re looking to catch trout in order to have it for dinner.<sup>55</sup> With a proper maxim in hand, the CI-procedure requires determining whether one’s maxim can hold as a universal law without creating a contradiction.<sup>56</sup> This requires

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<sup>53</sup> I take the term, “success condition” from Barbara Herman’s discussion in “Moral Deliberation.”

<sup>54</sup> Korsgaard, *Standpoint*, 143; emphasis added. Korsgaard’s characterization emphasizes the structural parallels between the form of a maxim and causal laws, thereby tying her account to the Categorical Imperative’s Formula of the Law of Nature: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” Kant, *Grounding*, 30; RPA 421. (For quotes from Kant, I will cite the Royal Prussian Academy page number immediately following the page number of the cited edition.) See also Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: University Press), 1996. Korsgaard also points her readers to O’Neill, *Principle*. The affinity they share comes out best, I think, in Chapter Three of Korsgaard, *Standpoint*.

<sup>55</sup> Regarding the issue of act-descriptions, there is, of course, more than one possible description of an act, and much ink has been spilled on whether this is a problem in the testing of an agent’s maxim. It might seem that the act description one invokes in the evaluation of an action is at least as crucial as the universality test itself. Again, this issue is not central to my concerns. One can find further discussion of the topic in Nell, *Principle* and Barbara Herman, “The Practice of Moral Judgment,” in *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 73-93.

<sup>56</sup> Generally speaking, the New Kantians tend to emphasize the Formula of Universal Law and the Formula of the Law of Nature of the Categorical Imperative. In broad terms,

translating the maxim into its universalized form. Using the example from above: everybody will fish upstream if they are looking to catch trout in order to have it for dinner.<sup>57</sup>

Turning to evaluation, agents are to evaluate their maxim as a potential principle of action in a hypothetical world where the UC of that maxim holds as a universal law. If this state of affairs is conceptually and volitionally possible, then the action is in accord with duty.<sup>58</sup> In this section, I'll focus on the contradiction in conception test. Discussion

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the *Critique of Practical Reason* endorses this priority: "The rule of judgment under laws of pure practical reason is: ask yourself whether, if the action you propose should take place by a law of nature of which you yourself were a part, you could regard it as possible through your own will." Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge: University Press), 1788/1997, 60; RPA 5:69. One also finds Kant recommending this policy in the *Grounding*: "one does better if in moral judgment he follows the rigorous method and takes as his basis the universal formula of the categorical imperative: Act according to that maxim which can at the same time make itself a universal law." Kant, *Grounding*, 42; RPA 437. Using these formulations as the guide in maxim construction serves two purposes for the practical interpretation. On the one hand, construing a maxim as a law of nature is a way of insisting on universalization. On the other, the move can forestall the following objection: if, in assessing a maxim, one could see that the result of following it universally created an unstable state of affairs, one in which following the maxim would become unsuccessful not quite immediately, that might not constitute a practical contradiction. Such an outcome "describes a situation that could not last rather than a situation that could not be." The Law of Nature formulation of a maxim is supposed to undermine this worry because "the law of nature that could not last also could not be." Korsgaard, *Standpoint*, 141-42.

<sup>57</sup> Universalizing a maxim is not simply translating it into a universal claim. Universal statements do not have the form of a law, which is what the CI-procedure requires. Universal claims describe what in fact happens, albeit universally. A practical law, in contrast, would express a claim about what *must* happen universally. In Kantian terminology, universalization of the maxim follows the *type* of the moral law. Thus O'Neill refers to it as the *Universalized Typified Counterpart* (UC) of the maxim. For O'Neill's appropriation of the term, see *Principle*. For the original Kantian terminology, see Kant, *Practical Reason*, 60, RPA, 5:69.

<sup>58</sup> Categorizing the different kinds of duties is an exegetical controversy, and I will not take it up here. There is one broad distinction that will be of use in thinking about the significance of the two tests included in the CI-procedure. Some duties amount to the

of contradictions in the will follows in the next section.

The New Kantians' main idea is to see the contradictions that arise out of the CI-procedure as practical ones. So the tests take *intentions* as their inputs. The contradiction in conception test (CC) evaluates whether it is possible for an agent to hold both her maxim and the associated UC at the same time. Contradictions arise just in case these intentions create a practical conflict wherein an agent could not embrace both intentions at the same time.<sup>59</sup>

Since the interpretation rests on the ability to maintain both a particular and universalized intention at the same time, the New Kantians must provide a clear account of what it is to have an intention. O'Neill is the primary source on this issue.

[The contradiction in conception test] asks whether we can simultaneously intend to do *x* (assuming that we must intend some set of conditions sufficient for the successful carrying out of our intentions and the normal and predictable results of successful execution) and intend everyone else to do *x* (assuming again that we must intend some conditions sufficient for the successful execution of their intentions and the normal and predictable results of such execution)..... There are..... good reasons for calling the contradictions which may be derived from applications of this test "inner impossibilities." They mark an incoherence *within* the intentions of a particular agent.<sup>60</sup>

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performance of a particular action. These contrast with duties to have—or reject—certain ends. The former are typically construed as *duties of justice*, since one can force compliance in the performance (or nonperformance) of an action. The latter tend to be seen as *duties of virtue*. For while agents can be compelled to act in accordance with a given end, they cannot be forced to embrace the end as such. The contradiction in conception test is thought to delineate duties of justice, whereas the contradiction in the will test determines duties of virtue.

<sup>59</sup> One can contrast this interpretation with the more traditional "logical interpretation," according to which an agent's maxim fails the contradiction in conception test because it cannot be *conceived* as a universal law without contradiction. See Herman, "Moral Deliberation;" Nell, *Principle*; Korsgaard, *Standpoint*, 42-50; and Korsgaard, "Kant's Formula of Universal Law," in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, 81-87.

<sup>60</sup>Nell, *Principle*, 73, emphasis added.

In having an intention, one presupposes the stability of basic empirical facts about the context of action. If I intend to go fishing, then at the very least, it must be a stable fact about the world that fish exist, that they are accessible to me, and that there is a reasonably efficient technology for catching them. Intentions also require that the world is familiar and predictable, since successful actions must fit the circumstances. In addition, the New Kantians demand that having an intention includes the expectation of “the normal and predictable result” of the proposed action. Their account of the CI-procedure appeals directly to this expectation of success for both the personal and universalized version of the maxim. This addition is crucial for them, as it is this aspect of having intentions that generates practical contradictions.<sup>61</sup>

There is also the matter of describing universalized intentions. Korsgaard suggests that we understand them as a “standard procedure” for achieving a given end.

It is not just that others with purposes like yours may behave or find natural the option of behaving as you propose to behave. That would not capture the full force of “law of nature.” A standard procedure is *the* natural, obvious, automatic way of doing something. It is the method used by the culture or society, the one learned by

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<sup>61</sup> In bringing both the background circumstances and the success conditions into consideration within the CI-procedure, there may be some concern that it invokes empirical considerations in generating a contradiction. Without placing some limits on how such information enters into the test, the practical interpretation simply could not get off the ground. O’Neill proposes two constraints. First, agents must presuppose the same background circumstances and success conditions in their analysis of the agent’s maxim as in the hypothetical world of the UC. So, for instance, if one takes staking the flag on the enemy’s territory as one’s end, then successfully performing that action is the standard for assessing the rationality of both the personal and universalized form of the maxim. Her second constraint is that agents must presuppose the basic features of the “system of nature” in which humans actually operate. This issue touches upon Korsgaard’s concern with the status of laws of nature that I pointed out in an earlier footnote. If it’s true that “the law of nature that could not last also could not be,” then this amounts to an additional condition on the hypothetical world of the UC: the UC must be an enduring law. The consequences of that fact will affect the prospects for an agent’s maxim. Korsgaard, *Standpoint*, 62.

children, the one graced by the authority of tradition and convention.<sup>62</sup>

O'Neill suggests that we construe universalized intentions as the intentions of a universal legislator whose dictates are followed out of necessity.<sup>63</sup>

Coming back to the CI-procedure, the contradiction in conception test directs an agent to ask whether both the personal and universalized maxims can be held as intentions at the same time. Contradictions arise when the agent's proposed course of action (as an individual) is no longer a means to the given end in the UC-world. It's a contradiction because a practically rational agent cannot be committed to achieving an end and performing a given action as the means, if it's clear that the action will not meet with success. The situation amounts to a *practical* contradiction because such intentions violate the Hypothetical Imperative: "Whoever wills the end, wills (so far as reason has decisive influence on his actions) also the means that are indispensably necessary to his actions and that lie in his power."<sup>64</sup> If a maxim does not actually represent a means-end strategy for achieving the goal, reason requires that we replace it with one that does.

If an action is untenable as a means to the end in the UC-world, the CC test construes it as irrational and immoral. The decisive feature of intention, the one driving the outcome of the test, is the expectation of success. Evaluating the rationality of an intention appeals to that consideration at two different moments in the overall procedure. First, we confirm that an action is a means to an end as a condition placed on a maxim's form before applying the CC test. Second, the CC test requires confirming it *again* when

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<sup>62</sup> Korsgaard, *Standpoint*, 93.

<sup>63</sup> See Nell, *Principle*, 70.

<sup>64</sup> Kant, *Grounding*, 27; RPA 417.

placed in the context of the UC-world.<sup>65</sup>

The New Kantians see maxims as articulating causal relations. Kant makes that point immediately after his famous characterization of the Hypothetical Imperative: “In willing an object as my effect there is already thought the causality of myself as an acting cause, i.e., the use of means.”<sup>66</sup> This might make it seem that, when the New Kantians call for an evaluation of a maxim’s “expectation of success,” they are asking for a simple causal analysis and nothing further. All that would be required is determining whether performing an action would be capable of *causing* the end. If *that’s* what meeting the condition demands, then it doesn’t look as if the expectation of success amounts to a deep commitment to achieving it.

Kantian scholars debate what Kant means by “an acting cause.” What matters for our purposes, however, is what the New Kantians commit themselves to in the practical interpretation; but they do take an expectation of success to be more than a mere causal analysis of a maxim. They take the success condition to include a commitment to

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<sup>65</sup> The practical interpretation runs into trouble handling maxims of nonreciprocal action. For example, consider the maxim of always paying for a tank of gas but never filling the tank. On the practical interpretation, this maxim cannot be consistently universalized: if everyone embraced the maxim, tanks wouldn’t get filled, and cars wouldn’t function as modes of transportation. Presumably the point of paying for a tank of gas is to be able to use the car for transportation. O’Neil solves the problem by making use of the fact that the converse of the maxim is also not universalizable: an agent arrives at a similar contradiction in willing both that he always fill the tank and never pay for the gas and that everyone else do so as well. She proposes that the full CC test require that one submit both an agent’s maxim and the contrary of the agent’s maxim to the procedure. If the result is that both the maxim and the contrary are forbidden, then the proposed course of action is permissible. However successful this proposal may be, it is not directly pertinent to my concerns, and so I will leave it aside. The duty of reciprocity, if it is one, is a separate matter. If it is a duty, it will be a duty of virtue, which the contradiction in the will test handles.

<sup>66</sup> Kant, *Grounding*, 27, RPA 417.

achieving the end.<sup>67</sup> Looking to Korsgaard's *Self-Constitution*, we find sufficient evidence of this. "Deciding is *committing* yourself to doing the thing. That is another way of saying acting is determining yourself to be a cause."<sup>68</sup> On her account, the Hypothetical Imperative is "a normative principle essential to, constitutive of, action itself. To act is essentially to take the means to your end ... And to take the means to your end is ... to determine yourself to cause the end—that is, to deploy the objects that will bring the end about."<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, her analysis of action is grounded on the notion of efficacy. "This much normativity—that the agent is guided by some norm of efficacy—is inherent in the very idea of action."<sup>70</sup> It is because we constitute ourselves as agents *through* our actions that they must be effective. If we aren't effective, we aren't agents at all.

If your action is unsuccessful and you do not bring about the state of affairs that you intended, it is not (or not just) the action that is ineffective. It is not as if you were effective in producing the action, but then the action, once out there in the world, failed, like a defective machine you have invented and then let loose on the world. The action is not your product: it was *you* that failed. An unsuccessful action renders you ineffective. Therefore a successful action is one that renders you effective.<sup>71</sup>

At least for Korsgaard's version of the practical interpretation, then, rational willing is

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<sup>67</sup> The claim that this is Kant's position is controversial, but New Kantians have found assertions that would seem to support their interpretation. A few lines farther along in the famous passage, for instance, we get this: "It is one and the same thing to conceive of something as an effect that is possible in a certain way through me and to conceive of myself as acting in the same way with regard to the aforesaid effect." Ibid. As I said, the strength of their interpretation of Kant is not my concern.

<sup>68</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 77. The emphasis is hers.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

willing success itself and not simply confirming the correctness of one's causal analysis in a maxim. Korsgaard's claims about self-constitution are her own, but the analysis of the hypothetical imperative—and with it the underlying notion of intention—is a core component of the practical interpretation more generally. Thus, New Kantians will endorse it.<sup>72</sup> Having an intention is not just expecting success; it is committing to succeeding. One simply does not see New Kantians considering the possibility that volition or intention might be more complex, nor any investigation of how such complexity would influence our understanding of the Hypothetical Imperative, and that is not so surprising; for they inherit the bivalent picture of volition from the previous generation's work in both moral and practical philosophy.

Of course, the New Kantians do not turn a blind eye to the reality that individuals often experience a change of heart about their final ends. They can and will acknowledge that we abandon goals. Their explanation for that phenomenon is that our desires are arational: *that is* what comes and goes, yet *psychological* considerations do not enter into evaluating the *rationality* of an intention. On the New Kantian account, a rational intention involves expecting success, both in terms of causal analysis and obligation. Psychological predictions do not matter. Both the individual and the universal intention are evaluated as subject to the success condition.<sup>73</sup> My concerns with the practical interpretation address this issue directly.

The classic example of a contradiction in conception cited in the literature is the

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<sup>72</sup> For a confirmation from O'Neill, see "Consistency in Action," 311. For Herman, see "Moral Deliberation," 138.

<sup>73</sup> For a Kantian version, see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 358-365.



case of deceitful promising. For the sake of variety, I'm going to lay out an analogous but novel case. Let's suppose an individual considers the following maxim: "Never pay taxes, for the sake of living a more privileged lifestyle." Tax evasion promises greater privilege to all economic classes. For some, that translates into nicer clothing and better food. For others, it means luxury condominiums and the furnishings to go with it. Universalizing the maxim, we get: "No one pays taxes, for the sake of a more privileged lifestyle." Following the New Kantians' account of intention, we are led to the conclusion that this maxim is impermissible, since in a world where no one pays taxes, governmental protection of the citizenry fails. Economic, political, and social institutions soon follow, and as a result the economic status of every individual is undermined. Where governmental services and protections are unavailable, no one gets a more privileged lifestyle. In the UC-world, tax evasion is not a means to the end. On the practical interpretation, the contradiction arises because the individual's proposed course of action ceases to be an actual means to the end in the universalized context. Furthermore, if we don't expect success, we can't commit to it.

By locating contradictions in conception in the fact that a proposed action fails to be a means to the end, the practical interpretation construes the test as a question of an agent's adherence to the Hypothetical Imperative. That determination is underwritten by a concept of intention in which achieving one's goals is at the core of an agent's practical stance. The problems that arise relate to the *action* in question, not the end. Thus, the CC test functions as a way of evaluating particular actions. Later, when we look at the contradiction in the will test, we'll see how the CI-procedure adjudicates an agent's ends.

### Critiquing the Contradiction in Conception Test

The problem with the New Kantian proposal is that we do not fully commit to achieving the goals of our long-term intentions. Such intentions, then, are not even *candidates* for undergoing the CI-procedure. We can perform a causal analysis of our plans to confirm that they would succeed if we were to follow through, but that doesn't amount to a thorough-going commitment. More importantly, since our intentions are not like those demanded by the practical interpretation of the CC test, the evaluation rendered by it is irrelevant to their rational or moral status.

Of course, final ends are the organizing principles of our short- and long-term plans. This is true even though long-term intentions are partial practical commitments. Our experiences generate change in our practical attitudes over time: life ambitions alter in a normally lived life. *We* change over time, and that means our practical perspective is evolving. We mature, both as persons and as human beings. For this reason, the majority of long-term goals we take up at different points in our lives do not survive the inevitable transitions we experience. That's just a natural fact about us.

To be clear, coming to see that long-term goals are partial commitments does not entail that *no* long-term goals endure. Some individuals hold onto core goals over extensive periods, but enduring goals are relatively few in comparison with the many that get put aside. Indeed, core commitments are often one of the reasons we have for walking away from other aims: people usually can't get everything they want. It's not *impossible* that a little girl will become a ballerina when she grows up, but the chances are pretty low. We do expect—and we *should* expect—to abandon the majority of long-term goals we pursue at one time or another.

We underestimate the frequency with which we abandon long-term goals because we tend to walk away from one goal or a small cluster of goals at a time, leaving a much larger set of ends in place. Most of us need and want a sense of continuity over time; we rely on it as a source of self-understanding. Because that's so, we focus on what remains stable and motivationally important. The concerns and interests that get left behind fall out of consideration.

More importantly, acknowledging the partiality of long-term commitment does not undermine the presence of real commitment to pursuing our current long-term goals for now. The observation that the investment is not absolute reinforces the fact that the motivational significance of long-term goals is grounded by present practical attitudes. Long-term goals and plans portray how one's current concerns and interests are supposed to turn out. And this explains why active long-term goals play a crucial role in present deliberation: we use them as the frame for managing our present practical agenda. Given the authenticity of our present commitments, that makes sense. There will be a payoff, either in terms of moving one closer to a final end that remains motivationally significant *or* in terms of realizing that pursuing the goal is unsatisfying. If the latter turns out to be true, one gets valuable information about how one's interests have changed. Both outcomes are practically valuable.

The lesson to learn is that—contrary to the New Kantian assumption—*having a rational long-term intention does not require a thorough-going commitment to achieving the end*. Because we cannot say antecedently which goals will get put aside, this is a *general* feature of long-term intention. We pursue them in the present without requiring the expectation of success.

If success is not a criterion for forming an intention, it shouldn't enter into evaluating the rationality of the intention. Willing an end certainly requires agents to will the means, but since we have only an abortive stake in the outcome of our long-term plans, we cannot and do not presume that we will achieve them. Thus, the success condition is not a legitimate condition of rational long-term intending.<sup>74</sup> Given this conclusion, individuals don't need to concern themselves with the results of the New Kantian CC test with respect to long-term goals. Returning to the maxim of tax evasion, recall that—on the practical interpretation—it was impermissible because, where tax evasion is a universal law, individual tax evasion is no longer a means to the end of gaining privilege. Its impermissibility, however, is not just about failing the causal analysis. It's impermissible because it is irrational to embrace the intention, and that is a function of the fact that one will not succeed. Failing the causal analysis is simply a sign of the deeper problem inherent in the maxim.

When we use the practical CC test to assess the *actual* intentions involved in having long-term goals, no practical contradiction arises. It should be apparent that it isn't necessary to explain the psychology behind abandoning a goal. The argument I just gave actually concludes that partiality is a *general* feature of long-term intention. Still, filling in the details of the example may help clarify the point. In reality, tax evasion appeals for a while, but the majority of people who adopt this maxim will come to think that their quality of life is good enough and that the continuing risk of getting caught isn't worth it. Given that greater privilege does not turn out to be an enduring goal for everyone, we can't conclude that the maxim won't be a successful means-end strategy for

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<sup>74</sup> This objection is not directed at the question of whether universalizability is the mark of rationality. It is about what to test in matters of rationality.

any individual in the UC-world. If everyone is a free rider, then the socioeconomic system will fail; but such systems can and do survive with some free riders. There's evidence for that readily available: take present-day Italy. *That* system hasn't broken down yet.

Universalizing partial commitment produces a world in which the end is *not* universally realized, and so, more often than not, one's individual maxim continues to be a means to the end. In evaluating our actual long-term intentions—intentions in which there is no general expectation of success—the practical CI-procedure is too permissive. It is not a viable tool for adjudicating their rational or moral value.

It will not be possible to sideline these considerations about long-term goals, which are typically what matter most to people. I've suggested that the reason for that is not primarily our investment in a future outcome. Thinking about the future helps us determine what to do in the present, but whatever the reason is, final ends are a fundamental part of our practical identity. The fact that our practical identity evolves over time does not alter that fact. So deliberation about long-term goals is central to our deliberative practices. Abandoning them does not make them wishes or hopes: we don't actively pursue those things at all.

### Hedging Bets and the Hypothetical Imperative

There is a way to articulate my concerns by focusing directly on the Hypothetical Imperative (HI). I quoted the famous passage earlier, but I'll repeat it here. "Whoever wills the end, wills (so far as reason has decisive influence on his actions) also the means

that are indispensably necessary to his actions and that lie in his power.”<sup>75</sup> The New Kantians read this passage as saying that willing the end *just is* committing to achieving the end. Leaving the notion of practical commitment unanalyzed, it might seem that this is the only way to read the passage. One might think that willing the means can be a rational necessity for an agent *only if* achieving the end is a practical necessity—where the force of “practical necessity” is a full commitment. According to this reading, the success condition does follow from the Hypothetical Imperative.

It presumably never occurred to the New Kantians to consider the variability of practical commitments. Thus, there was no philosophical motivation to look for another reading of the HI. And there was not any reason to develop a way of talking about actions that would register partial commitments. Having brought them to light, there is another interpretation of the Hypothetical Imperative available: the partial commitment involved in long-term intention makes the Hypothetical Imperative binding. If you will an end, then you must will the means. That is true even if we make no assumptions about success *or* whether a present commitment will endure. Failure to meet this lesser demand does and should meet with criticism. If, in the prime of life, one intends to retire at 65 and yet does not actively save for it, that person is acting irrationally. It may well be that people on the verge of retirement have trouble walking away from work, not wanting to feel useless or bored. They often decide to continue on the job for a while longer. That does not excuse a current failure to act in accordance with the goal. So the Hypothetical

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<sup>75</sup> Kant, *Grounding*, 27, RPA 417.

Imperative is binding on willing as such.<sup>76</sup>

The contradiction in conception test is usually seen as more crucial than the contradiction in the will test because it adjudicates particular actions. The argument thus far presents reasons to reject the practical interpretation of it. Practical commitment to final ends is not wholesale, and so our long-term intentions are not subject to the expectation of success. It follows that the practical version of the CC test does not get a grip on long-term decision-making.

### Critiquing the Contradiction in the Will Test

The point I have been making about long-term intention will have consequences for the practical interpretation of the contradiction in the will (CW) test as well. Whereas my argument in relation to the CC test led us to reexamine the force of the Hypothetical Imperative, we will find that these considerations press us toward reconsidering the commitment we make to being effective agents, and perhaps changing our views about what sort of ends we can rationally embrace.

Let's start by reviewing the interpretation. The CW test assesses an agent's ends and purposes. The basic procedure is the same as the CC test, but evaluation centers on whether success, both individual and universal, brings about a rationally acceptable

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<sup>76</sup> There are, of course, a number of ways to read the Hypothetical Imperative. I want to distinguish my suggestion above from one in particular. It is a possibility that, despite the reality of partial practical commitment, agents deliberate about actions *as if* they were making a full commitment to the end in the interest of deliberative simplicity. On this reading, the practical CI-procedure would produce practical contradictions in just the way the New Kantians predict. Questions about the degree of one's commitment would be put aside as a separate deliberative consideration. The New Kantians would get the results they want, but the significance of a contradiction would be conditional upon one's actual level of commitments. This is not the proposal I am recommending.

outcome. The question asked is whether willing to live in the UC-world created by one's maxim would be rational. The force of the question centers on whether we would be sacrificing something by living there. In particular, we are to focus on whether our ability to pursue and achieve ends would be diminished. The New Kantians assume, perhaps controversially, that rational agents *must* have the goal of maintaining the efficacy of their agential abilities. Any maxim that greatly undermines those powers in its UC-world creates a conflict with that goal and therefore must be rejected.<sup>77</sup>

Suppose one is considering the maxim of living fast and dying young. Universalization of intentions—understood on the model accepted by the New Kantians—produces a world in which everyone does. In such a world, no one plans for the future, no one saves for the future, and no governmental or social institutions are put in place to safeguard future security and well-being. Individuals living in such a world will eventually find themselves in need of resources that they cannot produce in a timely fashion, and there will be no outside resources on which to draw. Living in a world where

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<sup>77</sup> If you are operating under the assumption that intentions manifest a full commitment to achieving your ends, it's obvious that you cannot will to live in a world in which your ability to succeed would diminish. However, even if the commitment you make to your goals is not always full-blooded, you will continue to pursue a wide variety of ends, and you will want to succeed. Whether you walk away from them later doesn't change the desire to succeed in pursuing them. Thus, the partiality of practical commitment doesn't undermine a commitment to agential efficacy. Generally speaking, human agents will resist any outcome that would imperil future success. I say "generally" because there might be certain circumstances where agents might choose to abandon maintaining agential power. For instance, some terminal patients seek to put an end to the discomfort of their illnesses, and there is an excellent case to be made for doing so. In *Sources of Normativity*, Korsgaard seems to acknowledge that there are legitimate grounds for suicide in cases of this sort. Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), 160-164. Her official philosophical position, however, forces her to reject that claim, and she confirms that in *Self-Constitution*: "We owe it to ourselves, to our own humanity, to find some roles that we can fill with integrity and dedication. But in acknowledging that, we commit ourselves to the value of our humanity just as such." Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 24-25.



neither individuals nor society in general stockpile resources, our capacity as agents would be seriously threatened. We cannot will to live in such a world because it contradicts a prior commitment to agential efficacy. According to the New Kantians, we must reject the maxim.

The function of the success condition in the CW test is not as transparent, but as the same view of intention is operative, we should expect the same kinds of problems to emerge. Recognizing that long-term intentions do not involve a full commitment to achieving them, universalizing them does not reveal anything decisive. Without any expectation that a maxim's purpose will be fully realized, the claim that one's capacities as an agent would be threatened is no longer plausible. Many maxims will come up looking risky or foolish, but no volitional contradiction will arise.

The problem with the CW test is that—just as in the case of the CC test—universalization gets traction as an evaluative measure only if we assume that agents expect to achieve all of their purposes *and* remain committed to them for the duration. That assumption is false. We can think about the consequences of this in one of two ways. On the first approach, we carry out the CW test using the traditional account of intention that the New Kantians endorse. On the second, we treat long-term intentions as partial commitments. On the first alternative, agents carry out the test with the presumption that individual and universal maxims represent full commitments. The maxim of living fast and dying young turns out to be impermissible: where everyone seizes the day without preparing or planning for tomorrow, there are no resources available to manage emergencies or our natural decline as we get older. This is an

unacceptable sacrifice of our capacity as agents.<sup>78</sup>

Such an outcome, however, doesn't apply to *our* long-term intentions. They are not subject to the success condition. To the extent that the CI-procedure imposes that assumption, the results don't provide a fair assessment of our intentions. So there's no reason to take the outcome seriously.

On the second approach to applying the CW test, we trade the New Kantian notion of intention for a conception of long-term intention that allows them to be partial commitments. We evaluate a UC-world in which everyone takes up the policy of living fast and dying young but not everyone maintains the policy for the duration. Universalizing *that* maxim produces a world in which the end is not fully realized. The perceived threat to our capacity as agents, that is, the worry that we would find ourselves in need of unavailable resources, is not a serious worry. In a world like that, the maxim of living fast and dying young might seem foolish on balance, but it doesn't produce volitional contradiction. Living fast and dying young appeals to those of us who have not yet felt the touch of mortality. Most of us live fast when we're young and slow down as we get older, turning our attention to planning and saving for the future, as well as supporting social institutions that will serve us as we become less able.<sup>79</sup>

No matter which account of intention we use in working through the CW test, it is

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<sup>78</sup> Of course, we can predict that most people who take up the maxim of living fast and dying young will give it up before they actually succeed. But this consideration is not relevant to the New Kantian account of rational intention; for them, it is the consequence of the instability of human desire.

<sup>79</sup> I pointed out in an earlier footnote that my argument doesn't require showing there are psychological reasons backing decisions to abandon long-term goals. The partiality of commitment is a general feature of long-term intentions. This holds true here as well. Again, filling in the story merely helps motivate the point.

no longer the kind of tool that the New Kantians need it to be. Just as we saw with the CC test, the CW test fails because its presuppositions do not get a grip on our practical commitments. The upshot is that the envisaged procedure is, frequently enough, deliberatively useless for us. Either it doesn't matter for our thinking about what to do, or it doesn't provide any determinate results.

I wrote earlier that the New Kantian interpretation of the CW test operated on the assumption that, as agents, we are committed to our own efficacy. For them, efficacy means achieving one's goals. It's a widespread assumption, but it isn't obvious that we have to understand efficacy in these terms. My arguments open the door to considering alternatives. People don't treat achieving their goals as the only dimension worth caring about in either decision or action. Thus, performing well—and so meeting some standard of efficacy—is not merely a function of achieving goals for us. The reason we see our lives as centering on long-term goals is that they orient us within a more locally defined range of acting and being.

Take vanity as an example. We all have it, but different long-term goals are more or less permissive about expressing it, and we manage it in terms of the long-term goals we have. In the hipster world, being vain is a critical characteristic. Although the rules are not crystal clear, you won't be all that hip without letting people know about how cool you are. At the same time, certain kinds of self-promotion are unacceptable. For example, being hip forbids telling people about how cool you are; you have to make it clear in how you act. In the business world, however, matters are entirely different: if you're not telling people exactly why you're better than the next guy, you're doing it wrong. Long-term goals can change, and that means the way you make these decisions will change as

well. Until they do, the long-term considerations presently in view help to determine the decisions that need to get made now.

Negotiating local decision-making is a practical priority. If we cannot manage the short term, there is no call to trying to control the distant future. Our efficacy as agents is therefore tied to an ability to manage local circumstances. Long-term goals and plans support us in our attempts to do exactly that, but success in this context can be measured without taking account of whether we achieve the goals in the long run. Thus we satisfy a primary criterion of effective agency through the successful pursuit of short-term goals. On this account of efficacy, the commitment we make to long-term goals plays a distinctive role in becoming efficacious agents in the here and now.

### Distinguishing Prioritization and Practical Identities

Until now, the focus of this chapter has been using my claims about practical commitment to critique the practical interpretation and the underlying view of intention. I want to switch gears now and return to my account of self-directed prioritization. In particular, I want to distinguish my notion of a practical ideal from Korsgaard's notion of practical identity. Because she employs the construct in addressing the prioritization problem, there is at least a superficial similarity to my account. Clarifying the differences will show that her account faces problems with respect to prioritization.

Korsgaard introduces her account of practical identity in *Sources of Normativity*.<sup>80</sup> Her thought is that, when an agent endorses a principle of choice, it provides a basis for

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<sup>80</sup> Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 100-113. She reiterates her commitment to it in Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 18-26.

having a conception of oneself.

When you deliberate, it is as if there were something over and above all of your desires, something which is *you*, and which *chooses* which desire to act on. This means that the principle or law by which you determine your actions is one that you regard as being expressive of *yourself*.<sup>81</sup>

Practical self-understanding, then, is a function of one's principle of choice. A practical identity is a description expressing that principle. Since we endorse a number of long-term principles at any given time, Korsgaard sees us as operating with a number of practical identities. These set the terms for determining what other maxims an individual can or will endorse. Our obligation to uphold the underlying principle of a practical identity varies with the level of commitment. Deep commitments represent unconditional obligations because "to violate them is to lose your integrity and so your identity, and to no longer be who you are."<sup>82</sup>

Korsgaard's practical identities perform two deliberative functions. In one sense, they are simply special instances of maxims for action. For example, identifying with the principle of being a good mother is to act as a good mother for the sake of (let's say) raising happy children. In this capacity, practical identities are subject to the Hypothetical and Categorical Imperatives. However, practical identities also guide decision with respect to more local courses of action. Thus, being a good mother prohibits one from making social engagements on most evenings.

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<sup>81</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 100.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 102. Entering into substantive ethics at this point, Korsgaard claims that human agents must be committed to the practical identity of being human. We are to understand this as a commitment to being a Citizen in the Kingdom of Ends. Of course, this is a controversial moral conclusion, and it has been scrutinized in the literature from the beginning. Because the issues don't speak to the question of prioritization, I'm not going to address them.

There are conspicuous differences between Korsgaard's practical identities and my practical ideal. For me, one's plans and goals come together to form a unified self-conception. There are varying degrees of commitment to different goals, but we commit independently to having a practical ideal.<sup>83</sup> The calculative structure of one's ideal does the work of setting priorities. Thus on my account, there is no call to assess which goals manifest a more thorough-going commitment, and priorities are not a function of upholding certain obligations. Self-directed prioritization evades the need to make such evaluations. In contrast, Korsgaard's strategy is to rank practical identities by measure of the strength of commitment or obligation. So her account recalls the failures of preference ranking and identification. It will come as no surprise, then, that similar problems arise here as well.

One thing to notice about Korsgaard's account of practical identity is that there is a tension between it and the CI-procedure of the practical interpretation. Given her understanding of intention, identifying with a description—a special case of a principle of action—amounts to a full commitment to acting in accordance with that description. Seen as practical identities, however, commitment is taken as a variable. Korsgaard tells us that individuals put less important commitments aside for a time in order to uphold deeper, more important ones. As long as one doesn't walk away too often or for too long, it doesn't undermine an ongoing commitment to achieving these subordinate ends.

However, that doesn't resolve the tension. For Korsgaard, it is *acting* in the pursuit of one's ends that constitutes you as the person you are. It follows that if you give up pursuing an end, even temporarily, you no longer identify yourself through the pursuit

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<sup>83</sup> Even this commitment is vulnerable; we can give it up, but it is a rare case.

of that end. In order for practical identities to resolve deliberative conflict, however, we will *have* to walk away from some of them in order to choose a course of action. If she maintains the claim that the agent continues to be the same person, then it's not *acting* in the pursuit of an end that makes you who you are. Rather, it's *committing* to the end that does the work.

Assuming that tension can be resolved, Korsgaard seeks to manage prioritization by measuring or monitoring the level of commitment one has made to one's practical identities and by ranking them. Instead of measuring the strengths of desires, we exploit the relative strengths of our practical commitments. I have already argued that measurement strategies of this sort cannot solve the prioritization problem. I now want to suggest that Korsgaard's hierarchy of commitment will not work either. The account assumes that practical commitment is a measurable psychological phenomenon and that our practical commitments are stable enough to produce priorities. There are reasons to doubt this. Moreover, concerns about incommensurability come up here as well.

But the real problem for Korsgaard is that—were there a way to resolve these issues—the resulting organization of practical identities would undermine her conviction that we constitute ourselves through action. Regardless of what such agents do, their constitution as agents becomes a function of the hierarchical order of practical identities at any given time. It is the commitment to a particular hierarchy maintained over time that matters. This is because having the hierarchy is what generates priorities, and having priorities is a precondition of acting. In suggesting that we prioritize through a hierarchy of practical commitment, the idea that we constitute ourselves as agents in *action* gets lost. The only action that turns out to be decisive is the act of deliberating about the depth

of one's commitments.<sup>84</sup>

Perhaps these concerns are not decisive, but they serve to mark the contrast between my view and Korsgaard. Self-directed prioritization does not push the problem up to a higher-level psychological attitude. For we do not solve deliberative conflict through an analysis of the weight or intensity of desire, identification, *or* commitment. Self-directed prioritization solves the problem by appealing to the calculative framework of one's plans. That structure can act as a tool for excluding options without moderating between disparate practical identities and commitments. Decision remains a function of one's current values and goals, but it is not tied to ranking them. We expect our goals to change, and so the calculative framework we use to prioritize will alter as this happens. Choice is therefore tied to promoting our present overall ideal. Such actions serve a dual purpose. They move one toward an ideal, but they also test the authenticity of that ideal. Thus one's sense of self is being constructed through action, not with the expectation that the final end will endure, but rather in a way that incorporates the transience of practical commitment. This perspective on questions of practical identity, decision, and action differs markedly from the kind of solution Korsgaard seems to have in mind.

### Conclusion

Developing an objection to the New Kantian CI-procedure, this chapter has cast doubt on what is a central component of their ethical theory and the underlying account of practical rationality. Thus, in addition to presenting worries about this contemporary

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<sup>84</sup> Korsgaard does claim that one does and must will to be human. That practical identity, then, is stable. As I suggested earlier, however, the will to be human does not impose an order on an individual's other practical identities. Thus, it cannot solve deliberative problems with respect to prioritization.



version of Kantian moral philosophy, my arguments create a problem for the model of decision more generally. The primary target was the account of intention: I have shown that, because long-term intentions involve only partial commitment to achieving the final end, the New Kantian method of evaluating these intentions is not viable.

Kantian moral philosophy is currently one of the three main positions in ethics, along with consequentialism and virtue-oriented accounts. Given its prominent place in contemporary debate, let me suggest some morals to draw. First, the conclusion I am offering is surprising in that Kantian theory is often taken to be the sole live alternative to consequentialism, according to which the moral value of an action is determined by its outcome. Rather than presenting an alternative to the consequentialist preoccupation with achieving ends, the practical interpretation of the CI-procedure shares an insufficiently critical focus on this notion of efficacy. The next lesson is that, as we pursue normative moral theory, we must pay closer attention to the many gradations of practical commitment. Third, a similar message applies to progress in the theory of practical rationality. Accounts of decision will have to incorporate the results of reexamining human commitment as well.

We have also seen how the prioritization problem asserts itself in noninstrumentalist contexts. This is a gesture at illustrating the ubiquity of the problem, and so also the need to revise instrumental preconceptions about decision-making. Looking at yet another attempt to solve the problem and noticing that it follows the pattern of previous failures is more evidence that a new approach is called for.

## CHAPTER IV

### LIFE IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE MAKING OTHER PLANS

In 1401, the clergymen of Seville adopted a plan “to build a church so beautiful and so great that those who see it built will think we were mad.”<sup>85</sup> This was the first step in a project that took 174 years to complete. It took 110 years to complete the main dome, at which point—in 1511—it promptly collapsed. Reconstruction took 8 years, and in 1519, the builders began on its eighty chapels and the belfry. Having been built on the site of a mosque, they converted one of the minarets into a bell tower, “La Giralda,” standing next to the cathedral. The building was completed in 1575. At the time, it supplanted the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul as the largest church in the world, which had held the honor for over a 1,000 years. It is the largest Gothic building in Europe.<sup>86</sup>

Building that cathedral was a *big* action. For action theorists such as Michael Thompson, however, size doesn't matter for the philosophical analysis of an action. Inspired by the work of G.E.M Anscombe, Thompson is at the head of a recent

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<sup>85</sup> Luis Martínez Montiel and Alfredo José Morales, *The Cathedral of Seville* (London: Scala Publishers in association with Aldeasa, S.A., 1999), 3.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

movement bringing action theory to bear on practical reasoning.<sup>87</sup> He argues that the structure of action is what makes acting for reasons possible. Actions are events that unfold in time, exhibiting a part-whole structure.<sup>88</sup> That structure underwrites our ability to understand the action's unity as an event, and it is also the basis for an agent explaining and justifying what he or she is doing.<sup>89</sup> By Thompson's lights, the action of building the Cathedral consisted of smaller action-parts. That arrangement of parts is the ground for calling a 174 year project a single action, and familiarity with the structure explains what took place in carrying the action out.

I'll be arguing that Thompson's account fails to provide an adequate analysis of how we deliberate about action. My focus will be the observation that deliberation about action is itself a process in which we continually revise and update our conception of the action. Large-scale actions, like building a cathedral, help to make that fact conspicuous. When you spend 174 years building a cathedral, your conception of the part-whole structure of the action changes as you go. Innumerable complexities and problems will arise, and they will require replacing the current draft of the part-whole structure with a new one. In the case of Seville's cathedral, for example, the collapse of the main dome was not present in the representation of the action for the first 110 years. So it was not an

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<sup>87</sup> Two recent anthologies provide an overview: see Anton Ford, Jennifer Hornsby, and Frederick Stoutland, eds., *Essays on Anscombe's Intention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011) and Constantine Sandis, ed., *New Essays on the Explanation of Action* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>88</sup> See Michael Thompson, "Naïve Action Theory," in *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 85-146.

<sup>89</sup> Thompson prefers the language of "explaining" what one is doing in the sense of "providing a reason" for doing it. For stylistic purposes, I will, for the most part, follow him in this and drop the language of "justifying" what one is doing.

element of the particular action that both architects and workers had in view, and it could not have played any explanatory role until after it happened. After the fact, the act of building Seville's cathedral *had* to accommodate it. This is a problem for Thompson, since on his view, altering the part-whole structure of an action fractures its unity. Thus, as representational drafts of the action succeed one another, we end up with a pile of abandoned actions associated with past drafts. We only get a fully complete representation of the action at the end of it, and that cannot be what guides activity in the initial stages.

Daniel Dennett made a similar point about perception in his book, *Consciousness Explained*. He argued that the constant influx of sensory information undergoes “editorial revision.” There is no “theater of the mind” where the mind’s eye views a fully completed movie that is the individual’s conscious experience. Rather, the final draft is produced retrospectively, once all the incoming data is received.<sup>90</sup> So it is with action: we rarely get a whole action right on the first try, even when it comes to actions of modest complexity. So as agents, we *have* to work through multiple drafts of an action as we go.

I am going to work through this argument against Thompson because it provides another perspective on the issues surrounding practical commitment. I have been arguing in previous chapters that practical commitment is an independent consideration in deliberation; its influence on decision is separate from preference, desire, identification, intention, *and* planning. Turning to action-theoretic work, I’ll be making a similar claim about belief. Acting and deliberating successfully do not require a thorough-going commitment to any particular belief we have about an action.

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<sup>90</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 111-26.

This works as a refutation of Thompson's view. But Thompson and the other action theorists pride themselves on their antipsychologism. Their aim is to provide an account of practical reasoning that diminishes the role of arational elements in deliberation. So the conclusion that we must incorporate an account of practical commitment into an acceptable account of practical rationality will be especially unwelcome for them. Once that argument is in place, I will turn to the prioritization problem once again, and we will see that Thompson's account faces difficulties here as well.

This conclusion is the last step of my argument that instrumental structure cannot stand alone as the centerpiece of our practical psychology. I began this project by looking at a model of our practical psychology due to Bernard Williams. I noted at the time that the model presupposed not only the centrality of the instrumental structure in our practical psychology, but also the role that instrumental reasoning plays in deliberation. I have been slowly chipping away at these assumptions throughout this work. Having examined desire, intention, means-end reasoning as well as planning, I am now taking aim at the final element of an instrumentally-based model of practical psychology, that is, belief. In doing so, I have put myself in a position to conclude that, taken by itself, instrumental structure cannot manage deliberation and decision effectively. The issues concerning practical commitment are too complex for the instrumental model to handle by itself. So while instrumental structure is central to our practical psychology, it cannot be the only thing that is: we need to enrich the picture.

### Arguing for the Primacy of Action-theoretic Explanation

I'll begin with an overview of Thompson's position. Action-theoretic views of practical reasoning hold that the explanation and justification of action invoke the features of action, appealing to its event-like, part-whole structure. Rationalizing a particular action locates it within the frame of a larger, unfolding action: "I am laying this stone because I am building a wall." We can repeat the form of explanation, further embedding this explanation within another: "I'm building a wall because I'm building a cathedral."<sup>91</sup>

The view initially looks similar to instrumentalism, and there is good reason for it. Action theorists are "inspired by the idea of unearthing the foundation of instrumentalist views, the buried but sensible source of current doctrine."<sup>92</sup> However, there are significant differences. Whereas instrumentalism explains actions by appeal to the psychological states of the individual, Thompson rejects that view. And while instrumentalists justify an action by showing it to be a means to a given end, he will reject this claim as well. He argues that appeal to the structure of an action is logically prior to gestures at psychological attitudes or purposes. So it follows that beliefs about one's action do the work in both explanation and justification. "The so-called belief component is all-important. For it contains the consideration upon which the agent acts in

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<sup>91</sup> There are metaphysical implications to these claims. Thompson writes: "If we may be permitted free appeal to the notion of a *part*, then our thought might also be expressed, a bit more metaphysically, as follows: an event, the building of a house, for example, is an intentional action just in case it is the 'cause' of its own parts—where, again, the intended notion of 'cause' is not pre-conceived, but is that captured by the 'because' of rationalization, whatever it may be.... it is among the marks of intentional action that such a thing is 'cause of itself' in a certain sort of way—and thus also 'cause and effect of itself, though in different senses.'" Thompson, *Life and Action*, 112.

<sup>92</sup> Vogler, *Reasonably Vicious*, 5.

doing A, that is, the thing that is more properly or narrowly called the ‘reason’ ... upon which her doing of A is founded.”<sup>93</sup> As a first approximation, then, we can understand Thompson’s work as arguing against instrumentalists about what comes first, action-theoretic reasoning or means-end reasoning.

Making the case for the primacy of action theory requires showing that agents can offer action-theoretic rationalizations for all intentional actions. This means establishing that every intentional action can be understood as a part of some larger action, and that every intentional action can be broken down into smaller parts.<sup>94</sup> Because agents use an action’s structure to explain as well as reason about what they are doing, they must be able to see the entire trajectory of their actions at the outset. That isn’t to say that every detail of an action be fully figured out; we fill in later details as we go. Still, we must be able to see the action *as a whole* from the beginning.<sup>95</sup>

This first stage of Thompson’s argument shows that action theory *can* precede instrumental reasoning about what we are doing. The next stage takes on the question of whether in fact it does precede means-end reasoning about action. His tack is to argue that thinking about action must track the metaphysics of action, and that this consideration precedes any other that might enter into our practical reasoning. Intentional

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<sup>93</sup> Thompson, “Naïve Action Theory,” 93.

<sup>94</sup> Thompson’s argument for this has been controversial because it has the startling consequence that every intentional action is divisible into smaller intentional actions. So he is embracing the idea of infinitely small intentional actions, *and* he denies the existence of indivisible or atomic actions. Cases like raising one’s arm, or impulsively winking at a stranger are *divisible* actions on this account. The claim seems implausible, and the success of Thompson’s arguments have been called into question. Since it is not directly relevant to my own concerns, I’m not going to focus on it here.

<sup>95</sup> See Thompson, *Life and Action*, 107-8, as well as footnote 3 on page 108.

actions are events, so he begins by looking at forms of thought relevant to that category. For Thompson, the most important feature about events is that we describe them in terms of “grammatical aspect.” In order to get clear about what that is, I will start by comparing it to the more familiar notion of grammatical tense. The tense of a sentence indicates *where* the statement is in time, i.e., past, present, or future. Aspect, in contrast, expresses *how* something is to be viewed in time. Supposing that I have just arrived at the library, I am in a position to describe the journey I made to get here. On the one hand, I can speak about that journey as a completed event: “I walked to the library,” or “I have walked to the library.” On the other hand, I can describe the walk as something not yet finished by saying, “I was walking to the library.” Thus, events can be represented either as complete or incomplete *within* time. Grammarians talk about these possibilities as either “perfect” or “imperfect.” When presenting an event as complete, it takes on a perfective aspect; when incomplete, it takes an imperfective aspect.

As a way of clarifying the concept, and as an additional premise in Thompson’s argument, states—in particular psychological states—do not take grammatical aspect. Something either is or is not in the state of being red. Redness is not a process that unfolds. An object that was red might become blue, and of course, that transition would be an event. We can talk about the transition perfectly or imperfectly, but the features of that event do not apply to the distinct states. Analogously, someone either does or does not want to go to the library. Being undecided is not the same as being in the process of going from one state to the other. Making that transition would be an event, but being in one state or another is not.

Since thought about action takes either perfective or imperfective aspect, we need



to consider the entailment relations for each type of statement. Perfective statements imply their imperfective correlates, but the converse is not true. When “I walked to the library” is true, a statement with imperfective aspect, “I was walking to the library,” will also be true. However, if it’s true that I was walking to the library, it does not follow that I made it there. The smell of fresh roasted coffee beans coming from the café might have tempted me into studying there for the afternoon.

The example I just used is in the past tense. Things are more complicated in the present. In English, for instance, we can speak imperfectively of present action, but we cannot speak perfectively of it. “I am walking to the library” is fine, but there is no correlate for describing a present action as being complete. It might look as if “I walk to the library” conveys perfective aspect, but it doesn’t. Statements of this sort make claims about habitual actions; “I walk to the library” means that it is a routine activity. So it doesn’t refer to a particular event at all. “I walk to the library” doesn’t entail that you are doing it right now, and the fact that you are walking to the library today does not imply that you do it frequently. Moving from one expression to the other is simply *changing the subject*.<sup>96</sup>

The crucial observation for Thompson is that, whereas grammatical aspect is an essential element of action-theoretic explanations, the psychologist’s rationalizations of instrumental explanations do not appear to convey it. This is because psychological attitudes are states and do not possess aspect. In, “I am walking to the library because I *want* to study,” the wanting looks like it is picking out a state. States are not processes,

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<sup>96</sup> An alternative function of “I walk to the library” is the role it can play in narration. In this setting, the statement doesn’t refer to a present action at all. The narrative present takes past events as its object, and so the statement is a perfective one about a past event.

and so they do not have aspectual features. Thompson wants us to see that the facts about grammatical aspect reveal that the two propositions in that statement are of different logical types. That observation speaks in favor of casting action-theoretic explanation as logically prior to the instrumental form because it is of the same logical type as thought about action more generally.

Thompson has another argument to make against his instrumentalist opponent, but it calls for a change in the way I've been framing the discussion. Up to this point, I have been characterizing the issue as a choice between two kinds of rationalization of action, and we were figuring out which was more fundamental. That's not quite right. For Thompson, there aren't two fully distinct ways of rationalizing an action. There is only one: the action-theoretic kind. Taking a closer look at instrumental rationalizations, he argues that, while they initially seem to refer to an agent's psychological attitudes, they aren't actually doing so. The "wanting," "intending," and "trying" we encounter in instrumental explanations are really cloaked gestures at aspectual features of the action in question. They convey how far along one is in the performance of an action. Thus, instrumental explanations actually do convey the imperfective aspect of actions. Explanations like, "I'm building this pillar because I want to support the roof" don't refer to an orrectic attitude. Rather, they signal how far along the agent is in the action of supporting the roof. An agent offering this explanation is in the preliminary stages of the action. Thompson's main conclusion, then, is that action-theoretic rationalization isn't merely logically prior to its instrumental counterpart because instrumental rationalization just *is* action-theoretic. If the argument works, Thompson doesn't defeat his opponent, he makes her disappear.

The argument focuses on the psychologicistic explanans, “I want to support the roof.” He points out that, while “wanting” is taken to be a propositional attitude, it isn’t modifying a proposition in this case; it’s modifying a verb phrase. Most philosophers have assumed that such statements are the result of semantic elision, the complete form being “I want that I support the roof.”<sup>97</sup> However, if that were the case, the embedded proposition would not convey the correct sense. “I support the roof” conveys an habitual activity and not a particular action. *That* proposition cannot replace the verb phrase without changing the meaning of the sentence. Thus, the orthodoxy is incorrect: “I want to support the roof” cannot be analyzed in this way. For Thompson, this shows that, in the case of action explanation, wanting, intending, and trying are not propositional attitudes.

This conclusion makes an alternative analysis of the form of action explanation possible, and Thompson supposes that the wanting, intending and trying of action explanations is expressing where in the performance of an action one is at the time of explanation.

If the distinction between imperfective and perfective modes of “inexistence” of an event- or process-form can be said to be “founded deep in the nature of things,”... then “try”, “intend”, and “want” merely express some of the ways in which a bearer of will or rational agency can be fitted into a particular dimension of this metaphysical structure.<sup>98</sup>

The supposedly psychological terms in instrumental rationalization actually communicate

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<sup>97</sup> Thompson points out a number of theorists who oppose the propositional assumption, and explicitly ties his account to the work of Annette Baier. See Thompson, *Life and Action*, 120-22; for references, see note 1 on pages 120-21.

<sup>98</sup> Thompson, *Life and Action*, 131.

that the action is still in progress, and so express the imperfective aspect of the action.<sup>99</sup>

Thompson concludes on this basis that there is only the appearance of a contrast between action-theoretic and instrumental forms of explanation. On his view, both types of explanations situate an action within a larger action in a part-whole relationship. It is in this way that we can understand his claim that it is only by being agents who can offer action-theoretic explanations that we can become agents who can assert the instrumental variant.<sup>100</sup>

### Destabilizing Action-theoretic Explanation

Many actions are well-suited to the action-theoretic model. The most persuasive cases are highly scripted actions. In theater productions, for example, everything the actors do on stage is predetermined. Surgeons performing complex surgeries require years of training because the correct sequence and timing of the procedure is crucial. And astronauts train for every moment of their extravehicular activity, i.e., space-walking. When something goes wrong, the agent gets back to the script as quickly as possible, and this is just as the Thompsonian model would recommend. Mistakes on stage aren't a jumping off point for reimagining one's character. When complications arise in surgery, doctors fix the problem and return to the proper procedure. And to the extent possible, nothing unexpected happens on a space-walk. The structure of the action is non-negotiable; thus deliberation *and* performance adhere as closely as possible to them.

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<sup>99</sup> Moran and Stone describe the point this way: "All such psychic forms are performance modifiers: insofar as they are employable in action-explaining answers to the question 'Why?' they express forms of being-on-the-way-to-but-not-yet-having  $\phi$ -ed, of already stretching oneself toward this end." "Anscombe on Expression of Intention," 54.

<sup>100</sup> Thompson, *Life and Action*, 92.

There are reasons to think, however, that Thompson's account cannot underwrite our thinking about a great many other kinds of activities. In many contexts, we cannot or do not want to regulate what we are doing to that extent. The way we assert control over different kinds of actions varies. We also miscalculate actions. In addition, we coordinate our actions, changing the plan as we go. Thoughts of efficiency, pleasure, or even spontaneity persuade us to change course. None of this is surprising, and that means we should expect the representational framework for determining our course of action to be dynamic. Unlike stage productions or space-walking, sometimes the best strategy is to throw the script away altogether. In such cases, one's representation of an action evolves. Thus agents are acting on the basis of representational drafts that are being revised as they perform their actions.

Thompson has trouble accommodating these considerations because—for him—the initial representation is what unifies a series of parts into a single, whole action, and it is that representation providing the explanation and justification for what one is doing. In cases where that representation is evolving, however, Thompson's model dictates that the action's unity breaks down, and so the rationalization of one's action loses its cohesion.

Let's return to Seville's cathedral. No doubt the initial plan for such a project would have to be largely schematic, calling for the production of additional, more detailed versions of the plan later on. There's no question, then, but that the architect synthesized the action over time through evolving drafts. This is not the issue I'm addressing. My objection is not about the need to specify an initially vague representation. I mean to be pointing out the need to either alter an action's structure in crucial respects or abandon that structure for the sake of another. Above and beyond

matters of specification, the facts on the ground in Seville between 1401 and 1574 would have forced both architects and builders to abandon initial drafts of their plans and come up with new ones at various junctures. This is the way to describe what happened when the main dome collapsed. The whole project would inevitably have been revised from blueprint to interior decoration.

On Thompson's account, radical alteration of the representational ground for building Seville's cathedral commits him to construing the project as a series of different actions rather than just one. For it is the agent's *current* grasp of the place that laying a brick has in the action of building a wall that rationalizes the action. It's one thing when the far end of what you're doing hasn't come cleanly into view. *That's* not Thompson's problem. Rather, it is that, when the action's structure changes, rationalizations before and after the change appeal to different representations. The builders in Seville would have initially looked to a representation of building the cathedral that did not include rebuilding the main dome. After it happened, *any* representation of the act would have to include the collapse and subsequent repairs. Presumably, they would have drawn up an entirely new blueprint of the church. The emergence of this new draft signals the existence of a distinct action for Thompson because actions carried out under the direction of one representation cannot be unified with actions guided by a different one. Where an action's unity falls away, rationalization bifurcates along the lines of the independent representations. Earlier stages of the performance now look like a pile of unconnected, independent actions that were abandoned along the way. They were *false starts*; actions related to cathedrals that never came into being.

An account of practical reason will have to accommodate deliberative revision of

an action's structure. This is not simply because we accept that building the cathedral of Seville was a whole action. Remember that Thompson's aim was to reveal a deep unity underlying the variety of human activity, and to show that this unity could be discerned in the forms of our thought about action. Instead, we have lost our grip on the unity we already know is there. We are left with a pile of unfinished cathedrals and one completed cathedral, a "rush job" at the end. Thompson has shown that the part-whole structure of action is important, but we can't help but notice that there are other considerations that matter: we usually can't predict what we're going to do precisely, and we can't control what ends up happening entirely. The upshot for practical rationality is that the unity of our thought about action is not to be found in the representation of an action, but rather from a perspective in which there is unity over and above the various drafts we work through in performing an action.

Thompson might think that there is a quick response to my worries. He might suggest that, in order to unify the action and the source of one's explanation for action, we can simply conjoin the representations we produce in performing an action into one larger representation. Any alterations to the part-whole structure as well as the false starts get "glued" together. This kind of "super-representation" can do the work of guiding the agent through the act, while at the same time maintaining representational unity. The "super-action" that gets explained corresponds to everything included in the super-representation.

However, this is a mistake. There is no predicting false starts or a radical revision of an action's parts. So the representation of either false starts or revision can only be conjoined to produce a super-representation of an action after the fact. Since they are put

together retrospectively, they cannot rationalize what one is doing as one is doing it.

Taking the idea of a super-representation a bit further, Thompson could suggest that we start out with a schematic super-representation of our actions. Thus, agents act on the basis of a super-representation that leaves room for false starts and revision, and for specifying what happens in progress. Generating this super-representation happens at the beginning of an action, so it can rationalize what an agent is doing, and it maintains representational unity. Unfortunately, this option simply reproduces the original problem. Agents revise their thought about regular actions. The reason is that success on the first try isn't the norm in managing actions. We should expect this to apply to super-actions as well. Even if a super-representation is schematic, agents will still have to revise them. Just as most regular actions require operating across a sequence of representational drafts, so too will super-actions necessitate a series of super-drafts. We can only produce an accurate super-representation of a super-action retrospectively. And that's too late to rationalize anything during an action.

Consider the efforts to contain the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The first reports of leaking oil occurred on April 22, 2010. The scientists, engineers, and technicians did not stop the flow of oil until July 10, 2010. It took seven separate attempts to succeed in their efforts. The first six plans failed. After each failure, they scrambled to come up with a new strategy, and in fact, not even the first of these plans was in accordance with British Petroleum Corporation's emergency procedures for such an event.<sup>101</sup>

If we want to understand containing the oil spill as one action—and presumably

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<sup>101</sup> R.J. Papp, Jr., ed., *Incidence Specific Preparedness Review (ISPR) Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill: United States Coast Guard Final Report* (Darby, PA: Diane Publishing, 2011), 109-13.



we do want that—we must conjoin these disparate efforts as parts to a whole. Doing so requires bringing together representations of the action that are not consistent with one another. The whole action, as it happened on the ground, doesn't come cleanly into view until after the fact. *That* representation isn't what guided the process of containment. And while it does explain things *ex post facto*, it isn't doing explanatory work when the action was taking place.

My objection to Thompson's position emerged by looking at large scale, long-term actions. But the point is not formally limited to such actions. The criticism I've presented applies to Thompson's action-theoretic account of reasons for acting generally. We can and do revise actions of all sizes. The only reason they don't exhibit as many false starts is because they are less complex and shorter in duration. Deliberative revision of our actions is the norm, not the exception in thinking about what we are doing. So, for instance, getting in my car to run to the grocery store, I'm planning on taking Fourth Street. Finding unexpected construction getting in my way, I take Sixth instead.

I wrote earlier that I wanted to use my assessment of Thompson's work to diagnose a more general tendency of philosophers working in practical rationality. Taking a step back and looking at Thompson and other action theorists from a broader perspective, we can characterize their project as an antipsychologistic variant on instrumental accounts of practical rationality. Their aim is to undercut the role of attitudes and dispositions in deliberation, while holding onto the deep insight about practical reasoning embodied in instrumentalism. On Thompson's manner of speaking, the insight worth taking seriously is that actions are events displaying a process-form.

The argument I have been developing against the account reveals a deeper

problem. Here again—as in the other accounts I have considered in the last two chapters—there is a presumption about the nature of practical commitment underwriting Thompson’s position. If he is right that deliberation about an action centers on a single representation, then performing the act is a commitment to *that* representation. It follows that committing to the representation is the same thing as committing to the action. Taking the reality of deliberative revision seriously, we have come to see that this presumption about practical commitment cannot be correct. The picture of an action with which we start is not the same as the one with which we conclude. Performing an action is not simply committing to a given representation of it.

Action theorists see practical commitment as a function of our beliefs about action. Here again, we are seeing that we cannot foist the work of practical commitment onto other elements of our practical psychology. Even antipsychologistic action theorists must appeal to some notion of commitment in the performance of an action. We can trace this failing back to the presumptions about the role and purpose of instrumental structure in practical thought. Whereas instrumentalists assumed that practical commitment is to achieving the end, Thompson takes the object of practical commitment to be completing the action. And his view commits him to construing practical success as completing the action as initially given in representation. However, commitment is no more about finishing actions than it is about achieving ends. That is apparent because of how we handle our action and goals in our lives: we walk away from them.

### Prioritizing in an Action-theoretic Context

My arguments up to this point show that Thompson's view is in need of revision. That conclusion came by way of illustrating that his assumptions about practical commitment are misguided. Stepping back and considering the larger thesis I have been urging about practical commitment, I need to follow these arguments up with reasons for thinking that the mistakes being made by Thompson about practical commitment demand an entirely different conception of our underlying practical psychology. Once again, then, we need to return to the prioritization problem.

Thompson does not address questions about how to choose a particular course of action from amongst one's options, so we cannot say exactly how he would respond to the prioritization problem. Given the structural affinity between traditional instrumentalism and his part-whole conception of action, we can expect that it will be a problem for him as well. While instrumentalists take the point of action to be achieving goals, Thompson construes our aim in acting to be completing actions. I argued earlier that instrumentalists must face up to the reality of walking away from long-term goals, but walking away from long-term goals implies that we walk away from large-scale actions as well. Thus, Thompson faces a similar tension between how we manage our actions and his presumption that we commit to completing them.

I just finished arguing that, despite Thompson's antipsychologism, there is an implicit appeal to a certain kind of practical commitment present in his view: Thompsonian agents commit to the initial part-whole conception of their actions. They can specify some of the details as they proceed, but the overarching frame must remain the same on pain of losing their grip on an action's unity. There are two ways of

understanding this commitment. First, we can understand the commitment psychologically, as we did with instrumentalist accounts. We commit to an action because we *want* to complete our actions. Thompson might have to accept this psychological moment, but he will certainly resist it, so he might try to construe the element of commitment theoretically. The type of commitment at stake in Thompson's account would be an intellectual commitment to one's belief about an action based on its representation. Either way, the assumption is false: we abandon large-scale actions all the time, and we revise and update our representations of what we are doing just as frequently. It's apparent, then, that Thompson shares the blind spot of his instrumentalist counterpart when it comes to large-scale actions.

What's more, if we accept Thompson's conclusion that instrumental reasoning just is a variety of part-whole reasoning, it follows that the deliberative strategy he endorses is *exactly* as inept at setting priorities as plain-old means-end reasoning. Recall that prioritizing becomes a deliberative challenge in virtue of the staying and swamping problems. The staying problem was an inability to stick with a certain plan of action, and instead, allowing oneself to be pulled in different directions by inclination. The swamping problem was an inability to register an authentic preference for a certain action when there are a number of options from which to choose. Means-end reasoning is not a resource for solving these problem, and part-whole reasoning isn't either.

Of course, he can try to insist that part-whole reasoning can set priorities. The strategy will be to make setting priorities an action, and the deliberative task will be filling in the parts of that action. Without priorities already in place, it is unlikely that Thompsonian agents will succeed in such deliberation. Even if they did, performing the

act would be vulnerable to the staying and swamping problems. This brings us back to the place in my earlier argument where we saw that this method of setting priorities is immensely inefficient, and that it would be to our advantage to have another strategy for prioritizing available.<sup>102</sup>

Thompson's first available response is to fall back on the traditional approach of measuring and ranking psychological attitudes. The objects to be measured and ranked on his view would be the degrees of commitment agents make to particular actions. Depending on what Thompson wants to say about it, that would direct the strategy at background psychological considerations like desire, or the intellectual commitment to a belief. Whichever he endorses, he will find the corresponding problems that arise in relation to measuring and ranking. Philosophers will argue that there is no such feature to measure, or that the feature is not phenomenological, or that if there is such a feature, it is incommensurable.<sup>103</sup>

His second option would be to accept that another deliberative strategy does the work of setting priorities. Thompson is not committed to the exclusivity clause of instrumentalism, and so he can concede that we deliberate about priorities in a different way. Heeding the arguments of Chapter II, however, we saw that the prioritization problem not only calls for acknowledging the need for an additional deliberative strategy, it also shows that instrumental reasoning cannot be a uniquely fundamental form of practical reasoning. By analogy, the prioritization problem also shows that part-whole reasoning cannot be uniquely fundamental, and this is a conclusion that Thompson will

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<sup>102</sup> See Chapter II for a more detailed elaboration of this argument.

<sup>103</sup> See Chapter II for a more detailed discussion.

resist.

I pointed out in Chapter II that actions chosen on the basis of self-directed prioritization are susceptible to a calculative analysis only in retrospect. I also claimed that instrumental reasoning could not lead you to the choice of a self-directed action by itself. Given the arguments from Thompson that we've surveyed, it's plausible to think that he would not concede these points. For he takes his arguments to show that the action-theoretic and/or instrumental reasons for acting enjoy a privileged position in practical reasoning: "What is distinctive about the form of thought-dependence under discussion here, as will I think be seen, is that it is internally related to the idea of action in ways the other things are not."<sup>104</sup> The "other things" to which he is referring are other types of deliberative strategies. So this is evidence that he takes the place of action-theoretic reasoning to be *uniquely* privileged.

Thompson isn't thinking about the problem of figuring out what to do, and he doesn't express any concern over whether the problem is a serious one, so it's natural to think that he would resist acknowledging the special place of self-directed prioritization in practical reasoning. Presuming that to be the case, defending the primacy of part-whole reasoning requires returning to the claim that it can set priorities. We will see that my earlier arguments against the instrumentalist on this issue apply here as well: attempting to resolve the problem with nothing but part-whole reasoning will fail in exactly the ways that instrumentalist accounts did.

Just as we saw that the fairly abstract goal of setting priorities didn't have enough substance to determine the means for achieving it, so the whole action of setting priorities

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 96.

can't show us how to fill in the parts of that action. A multitude of options present themselves, and without a prioritization strategy in place, agents fall prey to the staying and swamping problems in trying to figure out how to perform the act of setting priorities. We considered Schmidt's strategy of using a maieutic end for setting priorities. The analogue here would be to embed the action in a larger action, but this strategy seems even less promising in this context: there is no reason to think that adding more parts to the action will make the ones you can't see any clearer.

The final move is to concede that something other than part-whole reasoning sets priorities for us. Looking to self-directed prioritization to fill the deliberative gap, what's needed is a calculative structure underwriting one's large-scale actions. So Thompson might try to suggest that we embrace the action of constructing that calculative structure. The calculative structure one generates, however, must be grounded in authentic concerns and interests. We learn about what really matters to us through experience, and that means it will take time. If that's the case, we cannot trust agents who do not see building up a calculative structure for general long-term plans as a priority to actually succeed in completing the task. Thus, Thompson finds himself in the same unhappy predicament as his counterpart instrumentalist: neither preference ranking nor part-whole reasoning can solve the prioritization problem. However, accepting that another deliberative strategy is needed upends the conviction that action-theoretic reasoning is uniquely fundamental in the arena of practical rationality.

### Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that any model of practical reasoning should be a model that incorporates evolving drafts of an agent's action. Just as writers produce numerous drafts of their final manuscript, we as agents produce drafts of our actions as we proceed. In many standard cases, the part-whole conception of an action with which we started looks nothing like the structure through which we complete an action. And just as early manuscripts play a different role in the writing process than later ones do, we should expect that the representations of an action before, during, and after the fact will play distinctive roles in deliberation.

Underlying these observations, we have come to see that action theorists have also failed to acknowledge the need to provide an account of practical commitment. Taking up an antipsychologistic stance did not liberate them from the problems that arise with respect to those issues. Because action-theoretical reasoning also failed to manage the problem of setting priorities, practical commitment continues to be a concern in need of attention. Since I've argued that we do not commit to a given theoretical representation of our action any more than desire or intention, we must inquire into what the proper objects of authentic practical commitment are.

Integrating these conclusions into a theory of practical rationality will require a break from the instrumentalist tradition that goes even farther than the action theorists have gone. They took up the task of incorporating the notion of a process into how we think about action. Taking their efforts as a first draft, we must now begin the work of revising and editing.

Finally, the work in the chapter puts the last piece in place for drawing the larger



conclusion of my project. Taking instrumental structure and reasoning for granted, we have misunderstood its role in practical deliberation. This conclusion is grounded by the observation that instrumental practical psychology cannot provide an effective strategy for setting priorities. Without them, we could not succeed in achieving any of our goals, and so there would be no point to reasoning instrumentally at all.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The main goal of this project has been coming to terms with a basic observation about our lives: experience changes who we are as individuals, and this affects what we want and what we want to pursue. That fact creates problems for contemporary theories of practical rationality by standing in opposition to the traditional assumption that our main purpose is to achieve our goals. This conflict forces us to seek an explanation for why we construct long-term plans even though we typically walk away from them.

The account of self-directed prioritization that I've offered seeks to provide that explanation: we have long-term goals and construct extended plans as a resource for solving the prioritization problem quickly and easily. This deliberative strategy takes advantage of elements in our long-term plans as grounds for excluding possible courses of action in the present. The reason for having long-term goals, then, is to use them in solving current deliberative dilemmas. Seen from that perspective, distant goals are aspirations guiding present action, and serving that purpose rationalizes having them without a further commitment to achieving them.

Since my account reverses the traditional assumption that decision and action primarily serve the future, it reorients agency toward local decision and action. This

should be a satisfying outcome because, from the standpoint of agential success, concern about the present *must* trump our investment in the future. If we cannot be successful agents *now*, there is no point to planning for the distant future. Indeed, my thesis can help to explain why we would have developed such a rich and sophisticated ability to think about the future: it provides us with a highly developed capacity to strategize about what we are doing in present circumstances. For manipulating one's current environment in more subtle and precise ways is a skill that even *nonplanning* agents would value.

My proposal also liberates us from the tendency to construe the calculative structure of practical thought in exclusively instrumental terms. Self-direction is not the same thing as means-end reasoning or plan integration, but it makes use of the same structure in determining a course of action. Instrumental reasoning just is not the right kind of skill for setting priorities, and moreover, agents without priorities already in place will be unsuccessful in trying to determine the means to the end of having priorities. Thus, as a deliberative strategy, self-direction shows that we reason about calculative structure in more than one way. But this is just one proposal; if we can manipulate the structure in more than one way, we should expect that there will be a variety of tactics we can employ. Recognizing this reveals a prime target for future investigation. We can begin to uncover new deliberative strategies by examining particular deliberative problems.

Another result was that construing choice as a matter of ranking options is unworkable. Effective deliberation about one's present options avoids assessments of value, understood as the strengths of desires, obligations, *or* commitments. This will have consequences for current debate in theories of value. For instance, if we put aside

questions of value in deliberation, worries about incommensurability become less pressing for practical philosophy. I also introduced a new way of thinking about the value we place on our self-conceptions. One's current practical ideal—which we use in self-direction—contains the constellation of long-term goals one has in view. I argued that our commitment to having a practical ideal is separate from the commitments we make to individual long-term goals. Thus, a practical ideal is itself an object of value, and we are motivated by it above and beyond the goals that make it up.

One benefit of this approach is that, since the calculative structure of extended plans gives content to one's ideal, we can appeal to that structure in achieving self-understanding both for ourselves and in communicating with others about who we are as individuals. I tell others about myself by telling them about my larger goals, and I convey even more information by gesturing at how I am planning to achieve them. However, practical ideals can inform an historical self-understanding as well. Because it evolves as long-term goals change, we can construct a personal narrative by telling the story of what adjustments occurred, and how they came about.

The phenomena of evolving practical ideals and long-term goals draws attention to the nature of practical commitment. On a clear-headed assessment, it is—first and foremost—transient. That fact underwrites the need for a strategy like self-directed prioritization. In addition, the role of practical commitment in practical reasoning is independent of other elements in deliberation such as desire, intention, and belief. Incorporating these considerations into an account of practical rationality alters our understanding of practical psychology and deliberation. Thus, building an adequate theory of practical commitment into our model of practical rationality will have

significant consequences for moral theory.

My primary research objective in the near future is to determine how my view can inform ethical debate. Since philosophers assumed that achieving our aims was all that mattered, they focused on the psychology of setting goals and determining which goals were morally appropriate. Thus, one way of understanding contemporary debate between cognitive and noncognitive accounts of moral psychology is to construe it as trying to establish the role that reason plays in deciding one's ends. Regardless of which side one takes in that debate, the determination of one's ends won't be the only morally relevant consideration; for the moral significance of one's aims depends on the commitment one makes to them. Acknowledging that this consideration is a variable and not a constant will have to inform the moral assessment of an agent's goals.

Furthermore, my thesis—that having long-term goals is not necessarily a commitment to achieving them—presents a serious problem for one of the central moral theories in the tradition: consequentialism. Standard consequentialist moral theories assert that we should assess the moral status of an action on the basis of its actual or expected outcomes, and nothing further; but if we are not fully committed to achieving our ends, and we typically abandon the large majority of them, consequentialist assessment starts to lose its grip on the moral significance of what we are doing. This critique connects up with questions of the moral import of decisions made on the basis of self-direction: in many cases the real question is not about the ethical evaluation of achieving an end, but rather the significance of its function in local decision-making. Working these issues out is preparation for taking up consideration of the varieties of practical commitment at work in our lives.

We have come to see that practical commitment is not entirely a matter of our psychological attitudes. Thompson's action-theoretic account drew attention to how the commitment we make to our beliefs also informs deliberation. In addition, the claim that we construct and utilize a practical ideal in setting priorities is another dimension of practical commitment, since committing to an ideal is independent of committing to particular goals. This at least suggests that progress in practical rationality will come by way of marking the distinctions between aspects of practical commitment more clearly.

Finally, I have shown that an adequate understanding of practical rationality and practical psychology requires resisting the attractions of an instrumental approach. The point is not to abandon the insights that reflection on means-end reasoning and the calculative structure of practical thought reveal. Rather, we need a better perspective on their significance. This project has made some progress by scrutinizing exactly how we use instrumental reasoning in our day to day lives. Pursuing the goal of integrating my conclusions into a general theory of practical rationality will make our theory accountable to the facts on the ground. As long as we continue to have that goal in view, it will allow us to set the right priorities going forward.

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